

DUMA NOKWE

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ANC office in Dar-es-Salaam

Interviewed by Gail Gerhart

*[Duma Nokwe (1927-1978) was Secretary-General of the ANC from 1958 to 1969. Born to working class parents in Evaton, he studied at St. Peter's School in Johannesburg, Fort Hare, and the University of the Witwatersrand, where he pursued law. In 1956 he qualified as the first African advocate in the Transvaal. He also belonged to the underground Communist Party. From 1956 to 1961 he was a defendant in the Treason Trial. Banned, detained and in 1962 house-arrested, he fled South Africa in early 1963. He occupied leadership positions in the exiled ANC until his early death in 1978. Gerhart interviewed him while researching her doctoral dissertation.]*

*The whole issue of Nationalist philosophy and its appeal, and the range of attitudes that Africans held towards extreme nationalism is something that is very crucial to my investigation. I'd be curious to go back with you to the time when you were at high school, I believe you must have been at St. Peter's in the late 1940s?*

Early forties, it should be 1942-46.

*Can you remember when you were there hearing Anton Lembede come to the school and speak?*

Yes, I do. In fact I was at the conference at which he addressed the ANC Youth League. I think it was its second birthday in 1945. I think it was 1944. Then he put forward his philosophy of taking both the good from the West and the East, putting it together, Africa being the center and that type of thing.

*And do you remember what your reaction was to him at the time?*

Well, I thought he was an extremely brilliant and eloquent speaker; I thought he was a profound thinker, and I thought he was in search of some solution to the problems which faced the people of South Africa—particularly the problems which face the people of Africa. I think Anton Lembede did evoke admiration from all young men because of the very vigour with which he applied himself to the cause of national freedom. He was the embodiment of the rise of philosophic nationalism, I think, in South Africa. And for this reason he became the hero and star of most young people including myself.

*Did you ever wonder about whether some of his ideas were feasible or practical or realistic?*

Well, at that stage, at the age of something like seventeen, one admired the ingenuity of thinking and collecting all that's good from the East and West and putting them together, and Africa becoming the synthetic point of the totality of what is good. And also something particularly African about it. Nothing Western, nothing Eastern but the synthetic product being a purely African thing. At that stage one did not really worry much about whether this was practical. It looked practical; I mean if there was something good in the East and something good in the West, and there is so much bad in the West anyway. It looked as if it was the right way out. And so I think he inspired a lot of confidence and he was a rallying point in the Youth League. And the Youth League, anyway, became a very practical organization, and existed very concretely.

*How did it operate at St. Peter's? Was it a secret organization?*

No! No! It was not a secret organization, it could not have been, because Oliver Tambo was then our teacher there. He was the Secretary of the Youth League in the Transvaal. At least at this conference in 1944 he was there as its secretary. So it was not an illegal body. It did not operate, if one may use the word, on a unit level. After all, these fellows at St. Peter's were something between eleven, seventeen, eighteen and perhaps a few above twenty; but then they were little boys, and it did not have an organized form.

The first organized form at a college which I remember was one organized by Joe Matthews, myself and one [Godfrey] Pitje at Fort Hare; that is when we constituted a branch of the Youth League. That was in 1948. But at St. Peter's it did not exist as a branch. Its ideas found way among the students through the debating society. We had a very vigorous and active debating society. But some of us absorbed them through going to the meetings in town. Or whatever ideas were absorbed by visits from people like the late Lembede and A. P. Mda, who was also a theoretician, found their way to the students through the debating society and the ideas were introduced in such occasions.

*Can you tell me about the starting up of the Youth League at Fort Hare? Was Sobukwe involved in that or who were the moving figures?*

Well, the people who established the Youth League at Fort Hare included G. M. Pitje, who is now a lawyer in Johannesburg. Joe Matthews and myself, I think we were the sort of foundation members of the Youth League. We were at Fort Hare in 1947 when there was very little political activity. In Johannesburg of course we had the opportunity whilst being at St. Peter's to go to public meetings in town, Sundays or Saturdays, and we found Alice a little town in the Cape, rather quiet politically. And it was important for students to start getting organized, and we then started a branch. In 1948, January or February, I think.

*What was your connection at that stage with Mda?*

Oh, very close, very close. He sent us all the material which he wrote, and we in turn kept very close contact with him, indeed very, very close. And again I must say that Mda was admired by the intellectual youth and after the death of the late Lembede he became a sort of theoretical nationalist, that is a nationalist theoretician.

*How would you distinguish, or did you distinguish at that time, between the philosophies of Lembede and Mda? Did you see there being any main distinction between them?*

Not much. At that stage we thought that, or the impression that he really wanted to give, was that he was the true successor and true continuer of the Lembede philosophies. Because Lembede was widely read, and I think he was almost, you know—by religion he was a Catholic, but I think he had read a bit or some amount of Marxism or Leninism. But he was busy battling with this idea of producing something African in the political and economic philosophies. It seems Mda also had that same burning desire, his desire was to become the African Nationalist theoretician.

*You think he was personally ambitious to be a leader himself or simply a theoretician?*

I think he had some ambitions, drive for leadership; I think he did have that, I think he wanted to produce something which will be some.... Yes, I think that was—

*At the time you were involved in the Youth League organization at Fort Hare, would you have described it philosophically as more or less straight Lembedist, or did you already at that point feel that modifications had to be made in this kind of extreme search for something so purely African?*

Yes, yes, well I mean it became clear when we were at Fort Hare that there was a lot of groping being done in what is called "African nationalism". It was impossible to pin down what actually was African, you see. The world was sort of cordoned out in a small way, in a confined way in Fort Hare. We delved into studying and reading a lot of philosophic works; certain newspapers like the *Guardian* as it was called then, and others, also had great effect in moulding one's thinking and mind, bringing one back from the, you know, the heights of very fine, and thin philosophical talk, to brass tacks.

What was, of course, even more, I think, important in one's political development was that the year 1948 not only saw the beginning of active political work at Fort Hare, but it also brought in the Nationalists [National Party] who were down-to-earth, totally down-to-earth as such. And were not delving, I mean, in such high philosophical formulae. But they made their point simple and very, very clear. And we became preoccupied during that year, too, with something which was simple but effective. The reaction of the people—

---Interruption---

*You were saying that 1948 was when the Nationalists came into power.*

Ah! Yes, yes, it was then that even the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare realised that instead of working out or thinking of nationalism in its philosophical aspects and so on, it had better work out some programme against a very forthright and clear attitude of the Nationalist government of Dr. Malan, who were very simple, and very forthright and very clear. And so there was a general tendency of concentrating on a program of action, action based on the masses more.

I think the years 1948-49 show an important historical change in the development of the Youth League from 1944 to 1949, a sort of a philosophical groping, a sort of highly intellectual and abstract sort of a thing. A concentration more on ideas and on action somewhat divorced from the people, the masses of the people; a sort of elite organization. And maybe it was a good thing, or I suppose at some stage in any struggle one has to clear up questions of ideas.

But it did not complete that task at all, because of the advent of the Nationalists who quickly changed it, and got it to change from this philosophical sort of body, intellectual sort of body, to a body of action rather than ideas. And a sudden and close link with the masses of the people and particularly the masses of the youth. And I think this was a very healthy turn. The coming into power of the nationalists stimulated this strongly enough, and injected this attitude more sharply into the Youth League, which in turn became a catalyst within the African National Congress, for a clear program of action.

*When you say that this early period of the Youth League was mostly a philosophical one, I wonder whether you remember when you were a student at St. Peter's whether students in those days spent much time discussing practical problems, as opposed to philosophical ones? Did you as a high school student discuss, say how a revolution might be brought about in South Africa or what the constraints were to mass action? Or was this something that was so far from anyone's knowledge or conception at that point that no one discussed it?*

I do not think really— Well I should not perhaps— Sometimes it is the question of emphasis that was more predominant over the other, whether the sort of philosophical aspect or the action, the program of action, or the revolutionary aspect. I think that one can say that despite the fact that we were then living in an atmosphere of general youth revolt, that was the general attitude. It was sharp reaction, an angry reaction, mixed with an attempt to find some theoretical and philosophical justification.

---Interruption---

*You said the youth League in the forties, you thought was representative of a broader revolt of the youth against—*

Against the whole system of white oppression. And I think it is probably fair to say that the beginning of politics, by and large, amongst the African youth, beginning with the deep sense of grievance and even anger at the conditions under which they live. And the first expression is one of wrath and anger.

*What was it about the 1940's that created this atmosphere, before the Nats had even come into power?*

Well, I do not know what it was specifically, but I think that the 1940s were very special. In the first place, there was the whole World War going on; there were very sharp expressions of nationalism, and I think the world atmosphere was charged with an atmosphere of nationalism— defence of one's country, defence of one's rights, and so on. And in an atmosphere like that, it sort of illuminated and might have acted to illuminate the conditions under which the people were living in South Africa.

And the wrath and anger and the general military atmosphere of the 1940s I think was not confined to those who were the parties only, but it spread. And struggle and fight became the— was the order of the day. And it could be interpreted— it was an atmosphere in which— It was capable of, if one may use the electrical word, charging even feelings which were rather, or appeared to be, dormant, I think. The Second World War and the slogans which were bandied around—Freedom, justice and democracy—the newspapers we very opposed to fascism and that type of thing. And the experience of our people in finding for once that we wore the same khaki [uniforms]. After a long time anyway, since the first World War, wore that same uniforms as the whites in defence of South Africa, probably had a lot to do with creating the atmosphere of an examination and a searching examination of what was happening then.

*When you, as a student in the 40s, thought about action, did you ever for example imagine that you might, thirty years hence be sitting in Dar-es-Salaam—as an exile in a long frustrated revolution? What sort of a concept of action did you have in those days? How did you think of the future as unfolding?*

No, I certainly must confess, I certainly never thought of myself as sitting here as an exile! Like all youth, with the optimism of youth, one thought that some vague forms of action which were not defined, some militant form of action could change the situation fairly rapidly and quickly. I certainly did not have the ideas which I now have that the South African struggle is necessarily a prolonged one. And I must confess there was no clear revolutionary strategy which one had in mind.

As I say, I think that it is important to realise that the youth, I think then and even now, joined politics and political activity first out of angry reaction to the conditions under which they were living, and then only subsequently is that anger spelled out into some ideas. And this, of course, develops with the development of the political consciousness—for this is an emotional reaction. And then when there is a clear political consciousness—I think when the Youth League and the ANC together formulated the Program of Action of 1949—there was hope that the Program of Action would bring sufficient pressure to bear on the government to change its ways or to change the political and economic conditions under which the people lived. For that reason it looked a complete program of action for the achievement of the aims and objects of the ANC. Well, as you know, subsequently that Program has had to be amended and added to, so drastically, that today with the armed struggle as a program, it looks like a sort of a junior stage.

*Yes, well, it was twenty years ago. Were you at the Bloemfontein Conference in 1949 where it was enacted?*

Yes.

*Within the ANC, what did you sense as the nature of the opposition to the Program of Action, if there was any? I have the impression that the members of the older generation were a little sceptical about this—*

Yes.

*What were the grounds of their objection to it?*

I think people like Dr. Xuma—the late Dr. Xuma, who was then President of the ANC and had to relinquish the presidency because of his opposition to this Program of Action—felt it was too radical. It was too radical. They could not quite feel the transition of a complete break and the beginnings of a confrontation between the government—almost direct confrontation between the government and the African National Congress.

And also the great stress on the mass activity, the force and influence of the masses. I mean, the Program of Action was the one that could not be carried out by an executive body deciding and drawing up a petition. It was a program of mass action, and it meant organizational forms and activities of the masses and the drawing in of more active role among the masses of the people. It was really getting down to a sort of making the African National Congress a far more popular organization than it had been perhaps in the past.

*Do you think the fears of the older generation about mass action were primarily fears that they might lose their position of influence and leadership, or that they might—that somehow it was more a class conflict, that these were people who were in a privileged position within African society and they feared an overturning of the whole social order which might displace them as a more privileged group. I am just speculating—*

Yes, it very difficult in retrospect to say what the real problem was, except that, I think, there are some leaders in an organization that just can't change when the vital political changes are necessary. They are conservative by nature, sometimes without having anything at stake. I mean for instance you were asking if they feared whether they would lose their positions— Dr. Xuma was prepared to lose his position, quite prepared, rather than accept the Program. And never, of course, he never became disloyal to, even hostile to the African National Congress, an organization to which he contributed so much since the '30s, to remoulding it and to organizing

it. The ANC we found in 1949 was by and large—praise should be due to Xuma's efforts. But he just could not change.

It is so in different forms when the organization assumes different forms of struggle. Of course, these should be, there must be some basic reason why people don't change. It is not that conservatism is some quality that cannot be related to anything concrete. But I think by and large with people like Xuma— The next person who took the position, frankly, was even less revolutionary, less dynamic, than Xuma. And he had even a more bigger stake in wealth, his practice was fabulous, he was so rich. So you see it's very difficult in a situation like that to draw a firm and hard rule. To say that those who did not accept the Program of Action did it for this reason or that reason. It is very difficult. It was a political movement in evolution in which so many— Sometimes the factors are so varied that that it is impossible to hammer out a formula in which everybody would fit.

*I have found that to be true, and that is why I am groping around with these theoretical questions because I have not so far seen any evidence that there is any broad pattern. You must have been involved or continued to be involved in the Youth League after 1949. How would you characterise the evolution of the Youth League after the adoption of the Program of Action? Their whole perspective was then altered. What happened to the Youth League internally as a sub-organization after 1949?*

Yes, I think after that the Youth League had developed itself. After the ANC had accepted the mass Program of Action, it had to develop itself into an entirely different type of Youth League. And this what it was grappling and battling with. In the first place, it must be confessed that in the early 40s it was a sort of pressure group organization, not really paying complete and full allegiance to the ANC. That is frank and fair I think. Well, with the adoption of the Program of Action, two things arose, and then this in turn resulted in a very sharp internal struggle within the Youth League.

The first was the importance to the Youth League of paying complete and full allegiance to the ANC and becoming a real junior body of the African National Congress. And it adopted fully its policies, now that the ANC had adopted this Program of Action, yes. And becoming less of a pressure group within. That fundamental fact in itself was important in the face of mass action. The Youth League had to change its character from being a sort of a club or group organization, to mobilising the youth, in support of the ANC, to carry out its mass actions.

This continued to be a problem in my own mind, in the Youth League. Many people still wanted to keep it as a sort of exclusive club for purposes of pressurizing the ANC and others felt that, Look, we to have done that enough! The ANC was now going ahead, full-steam ahead, and now we owe it all our allegiance. And now our job was to turn the masses of the youth and to rally them to the ANC.

Now by and large it appeared that some people were adhering to this view, keeping the Youth League as a unit, an organ, small and compact, powerful organ with African nationalism as its fundamental philosophy. All fervent adherents to African nationalism. Bear in mind, their views were shaped by what they considered to be a threat from another body and another group with a philosophical point of view and which was a small and well knit, and that was what they regarded as the communists. And people like A.P. Mda really and truthfully thought that the Youth League must keep itself intact as a custodian of African nationalism in order to be a counter weight to the Bolsheviks and the Marxists within the African National Congress. So it was more or less keeping the Youth League as an ideological weapon against communism— what they regarded as

the communists. And this struggle, I think it becomes clear over the history of the African National Congress Youth League, over the next perhaps decade, up to the formation of the PAC.

*How did you account for the fact that there always seemed to be a certain number of people who kept on adhering to that point of view, even after— You said that there was one view that the Youth Leaguers should maintain this exclusive philosophy, whereas other people thought that it was time to broaden out. How do you account for the fact that there always were people who clung to that older nationalistic view? Did you have any view of why there were always people like that, or was it simply Mda and those that he managed to influence?*

Well!

*That's a vague question.*

Yes, it is rather difficult, I don't know why this continued. I suppose it (laughter) in its very essence, in its very development, the Youth League had this very potentiality as an organization of both being a sort of ideological forum for action— I do think that when once one had drawn in a considerable number of intellectuals, always the primary task or duty or primary preoccupation is thought and ideas and ideology, and so on. One must expect in an organization of that type the survival all the time of people who would place the emphasis more on ideological conflict rather than popular mass action. And I think its very history, the fact that it was originally a sort of intellectual body, a philosophical body, hammering out and trying to search for pure forms of African Nationalism, laid the very foundations for the remaining—a group or a division within the organization, those who believed in the pursuit of philosophy and an emphasis— Who believed that once you are clear—this was in fact the proposition—that once you are clear, that once you have a clear grasp of African Nationalism, once it is hammered into your head, you are already three-quarters of the way to emancipation. So I think this was so.

Who fell on the one side and (laughter), who fell on the other, I suppose a close analysis of the social and historical background would probably give the answer, which I am afraid we do not have the time to do (laughter). So I do not think that the elements of so-called “pure” nationalism which subsequently were being claimed by the PAC, with its consequence of a bit of anti-everybody who was not African, which was the original stand of the PAC, their so-called adherence to the 1949 Program of Action and also their strong initial anti-communism, I think finds its answer in this development of an ideological struggle and a search for what they call “pure African Nationalism”. Which really in the end became just extreme nationalism, and “anti” so many things, but very little pro-something.

*Speaking of this split and these people who you call more intellectual elements, a lot of the ANC literature referred to these people as “immature”, and referred to the Lembedist philosophy as “immature” philosophy, or a philosophy that appealed to immature people. Do you think that was an apt word, or what did the ANC mean when it said “immature”?*

Well, I would not stick to the word immature myself, but if it meant that it was an approach that really had very little to do with the realities of the South African life, I would rather call it unreal, very unreal, than even immature. Perhaps immature people do unreal things or do things...? I would believe that this is so. You see, the primary and basic problems which elements of the PAC posed, or the adherents to what was called “pure” African Nationalism, which expanded itself to Pan-African nationalism, were an unrealistic assessment of the situation in South Africa, completely unrealistic.

In the first place, take their opposition to the co-operation with other racial groups, Indians, Coloureds. They claimed that we were weakening and diluting the force of African Nationalism by drawing in other groups. In order to inspire the Africans, you must have them as Africans themselves, and to make them feel that they are the dynamic force of liberation without drawing in assistance from other groups. Because they say that by drawing in the co-operation of other groups you were proclaiming that the Africans were incapable of doing this. Well, you see, their whole reaction there was of African assertion, Africans feeling liberated and capable of freeing themselves.

*You felt that that was unrealistic?*

I thought it was. I mean, the situation under which we live would be very fine if we were living somewhere else, but if you take the realistic situation in South Africa, you have not only Africans oppressed, exploited. We have a whole number of other groups—Indians, Coloureds and so on. And then you have got whites who are driven by perhaps ideological, rather social and material, concrete position to support the struggle. Now what do you do with them? Do you say "wait!" let the Africans first free themselves, then we will consider what to do with you and all your goodwill and your support. Let the African first demonstrate to himself that he is capable of this? I mean this is not the type of way things work in the real world.

You can't tell everybody else "Please wait, we will fight it out". I suppose this happens in a boxing match, where one chap takes up the challenge and everyone else sits outside; but not in the context of real life. It's absurd. And once other people are struggling you must adopt an attitude towards it. I mean, Gandhi was there, and you can't wipe out that history of 1906. He conducted a whole struggle, he himself led the Indian people. And there might have been some Chinese in this, who might have been born who would lead the Chinese people. A realistic leader of South Africa would have to pause and say to himself what do I do about all these forces around me? And you will have to solve it. And unless you say, oh well, let them go on in their own way— And I think that is completely unrealistic and undoubtedly, would call it immature.

---Interruption---

*Wasn't the PAC making that point that if you had multiracial cooperation, you were requiring the average African in the street to somehow distinguish in his mind between good whites and bad whites, good Indians and bad Indians, and somehow this was too much for the man in the street. It was too much to ask him that he should make exceptions for whites who were sympathetic. Did you think that that was simply a mistaken interpretation of the popular mentality?*

I thought so, really. I thought it was a gross underestimation of both the political consciousness and the understanding of the masses. And frankly, I don't accept arguments of that type. I think they do a gross injustice to the political understanding of our people, and I don't believe in any idea where the leaders are superior and the masses are inferior. I think if a situation like that obtains, it is a sorry day. I think that a leadership firstly grows out of the masses, out of the complete conditions under which the masses live. And I found in my own experience in politics, that one— Sometimes the leaders have far more to learn from the masses than they think they can teach the masses. This idea of claiming the imagination of the masses on any issue, I mean those are the people who ultimately believe and ultimately understand even the necessity of laying down their lives, not blindly, for causes and for issues which they believe in.

And I must say I constantly can't understand this idea of the masses wanting, understanding, and the leadership understanding. I can't. I take it from myself. I mean, I don't think that a few degrees

at a university make a qualitative change in the ideas and beliefs of people. I come from a very ordinary family. My mother used to work in hotels, making up beds, and my father was a cobbler. A shoe-maker. But I found they understood the importance of giving me the education which I have, under very grave difficulties; education which they never enjoyed. And they were more fervent in doing so than even I have [been]. In growing up, I think people who make these fine or sharp distinctions between what the masses understand, and what the leaders understand, they are doing an injustice to the masses. I can't see on that basis how even a democracy can start working. I mean, after all, a democracy is supposed to be the government of the people, by the people, for the people. And if people are so dense and can't understand certain things at certain times, and only leaders can, and arrogate themselves this thing, its something quite a little like a trend towards unhealthy ideas.

*I wonder though if that doesn't overlook the fact that the experiences of people like yourself, or Africans who took a leadership role in the ANC, were quite different from the experiences of other Africans, working men, or labourers, in respect to race relations. Certainly your experiences must have shaped your views about race relations. I haven't reached any conclusions, but it just seems logical—*

May I ask a special question?

*It just seems logical that some one who had been to a university which was predominantly white would have much more rapport, say with whites than an African who had never experienced contact with the whites except as a slave to a master. Surely you might find it easy to co-operate with whites because that was part of your experience.*

I would be most surprised, I think if you take the proportion of our total leadership of the African National Congress, and in so far as university training is concerned, a study of that would reveal a very startling fact, that by far the majority, by far the majority of the leaders, over a number of years have hardly been to a university. Up to date! Up to date! Even up to date, I think an analysis of the composition of both the membership and the leadership of the ANC will perhaps show quite a different tendency.

One would have expected, of course, that if the ratio of political consciousness to education was having a relationship as was stated here, an influx, a heavy influx of university trained people—because students who are educated have political enlightenment and so forth. But the tendency is the other way round. It is not that at all. And it is not that for various reasons, I think primarily because I would expect far more bitterness and far more frustration in the intellectual group, which has gone through university training, and finds that having done so it comes back to exactly the same miserable conditions, the same shackles which shackled him.

You know the hopes of parents, I was about to say, for their children, even those who are uneducated, is to hope that they would after education, they would at least lead a better life, and that the qualities and the talents of the African people would be recognised, and there would be a loosening of these chains and shackles around. This is not so. And the African intellectual, university trained, apart from the frustrations of not being able to do precisely what they want to do, having to be forced into particular channels, and that having a full acceptance even at these—There are no longer any white universities, but at that time, not even a full acceptance, I think they go through even sharper snubs and even close contact with what they regard as sometimes not even their equals, in fact, even their intellectual juniors. This should make them a little more bitter when coming back having to do the same job for a much less—

Let me give you an extreme example, and this is not trying to be in any way racialistic on my part, to have a dense fellow or a colleague, in the same class in medical faculty, going to exactly the same hospital as yourself, and you're having to earn two-fifths of his salary. This should make greater frustration, more bitterness and less acceptance of this. So I was saying that I don't think that this relationship of training and so on is so—

On the other hand if one examines the campaigns and the struggles of the Africans, one would find that it was the masses of the African people who were more ready, even to listen to great revolutionaries and strugglers of all colors. During the Sophiatown removal, I think, any African who said that he could challenge Father [Trevor] Huddleston on, say, a voting contest in Sophiatown, was taking a very serious risk. From the African masses. And throughout they were prepared and more sensitive. The fact that they are suffering more, makes them more receptive of forms of solution and clearer judges also of people who are leading them.

After all, the African National Congress, its leadership has always been elected not by an intellectual group, but by the ordinary branch members from all over the country. They have steered the policies, they have discussed the resolutions, they have known what is realistic and practical in the cause. And they have participated and joined in mass struggles out of the belief that they were, rather than being driven or being pulled by the so-called intellectual class, I have a very firm belief, a very honest belief, firmly I believe in the vast wisdom of the people, the masses of the people, not taken individually, but if you work [with] them, I think they have been able to survive, even in South Africa, survive this terrorism out of a tremendous amount of wisdom. And an organization like the African National Congress which wants to continue fighting and surviving will have to once more resort to the firm loyalty and very clear understanding of the ordinary popular masses of South Africa.

*Let me go back to some more specific factual questions, which are important to the history but are less theoretical than what we have been discussing. I think in 1953 or '54 the Africanist movement began to take shape—this little circle in the Youth League that you referred to—and to form itself up in Orlando. Can you remember for me, if you can, the sequence of how that came about? Apparently at some stage, Leballo got himself elected to office, somehow in the Youth League in Orlando. Can you recall your impressions of that coup on his part in Orlando?*

Well, very strange enough Leballo was both in my branch as a member, and also his branch was under us. I was then Secretary of the Transvaal Youth League, apart from being Secretary of the Orlando branch. There were various little movements. Of course, one must say to start off with, the whole development of an extreme form of nationalism in the African National Congress was not a new phenomenon. You will recall the National-Minded-Bloc, which was previous. And this had nothing to do with the historical development of the Youth League. And A. P. Mda had a tremendous amount of doubts about the Defiance Campaign in 1952, which he expressed.

*Based on the participation of Indians and left-wing people?*

Yes; not so. He tried, to put it in a high philosophy, but this was one of his objections. I also think it was based on his constant fear of communism. He had some phobia about this. And he always thought that they were plotting, organizing in some dark corners. And then he came out with some pamphlet during the Defiance Campaign, almost criticising the Defiance Campaign. Not almost—criticising it very sharply. It was an underground pamphlet, but it was obvious he was editing it. It had no name attached; I think It was called the “Africanist” or something like that.

*What was the gist of his—*

The gist of it was that you can't face fascists with this passive resistance business. It is useless. You are just exposing the people to the fascists. You can't change their minds; that was the theme of his criticism of the Defiance Campaign. He thought it was a method of struggle which was wrong, against the type of enemy that we face. Then subsequently— And this fervour did develop. And I think also the aspect I have already mentioned, this of anti-communism phobia, did grip some people. There was some term, even at that stage, even apart from the PAC. Some group called the "Bafabegiya", which in a way was an extreme left-wing group, which was very critical of certain people in the leadership—Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, and myself, and so on. And they thought we were of the extreme right-wing group. But peculiar things do happen in politics.

*My understanding of that was that it was a disgruntled group of followers of one man who thought he was entitled to higher office—*

Well, yes, it was. They were staging, preparing a sort of a coup. And there were some extreme left-wing element— MacDonald Maseko, who is now in Swaziland, he also thought he should be something, you see.

*What was his actual relationship to the communists?*

He was in the past. He was a communist before the banning of the Communist Party. But— I don't know, they were spreading all manner of rumours, like people who want to stage a coup always do, but they were exposed and denounced. So during that too, there was— This was an extreme left-wing group. At that stage there was an extreme right-wing group in my view, which was also operating under Mda, what was later to be the PAC, the Pan Africanist Congress. So there was a sort of turmoil. And this was after, you see, after a very powerful, a very powerful and very pressing action, which naturally called for certain organizational changes and assessment. The Defiance Campaign, yes. All this turmoil went on at about that time. And these groups on both sides were actively trying to rock the ANC as such, and pull it one way or the other. It was a time for a reshaping.

*Can you remember what your feeling was about the Defiance Campaign around that time it came to an end? Did you feel fairly satisfied with what it had achieved, or were you disappointed, or how did you feel, how did you evaluate its success? How did you at that stage evaluate it?*

Well, I was in the last group which went to defy. It was by then clear that the enemy was going to strike very heavily. At the time I had naturally hoped that we would have been given much more time to rally more than the 9,000 people who had rallied into prison. I did feel that to some extent the enemy had out-foxed us, by bringing in this anti-Defiance law. But I was highly inspired then. It was, I mean, one of the first big mass actions I had participated in. I was doing law at the Wits [University of the Witwatersrand] and virtually these three, four, five months of my last term, I did not go to school at all. I was busy in the office. And ultimately I went and defied and got myself nicely kicked out of the teaching I was doing, I lost that job without any regret at all.

So I could say— I don't think anybody who is honest could say that they feel completely satisfied with the results of the Defiance Campaign. It was the campaign which was snapped, perhaps after it had done some considerable to bring the situation in South Africa on the international map. But we thought we had not exhausted all the potential that we could. But certain things resulted from it which were very important. These were the organizational

formations, even within the African community, and also within the White Community: the formation of the COD, and the Liberal party, and so on.

And inside the ANC too, there were these forces. Yes, as I say, it is natural after such a mighty move, and when people were now beginning to flex their muscles and feel that they are capable of something. So they had extreme right and extreme left tendencies, and I think the PAC, by and large was that. But I must say, starting from that, they were honest people, believing in these extreme forms, particularly within the PAC, who believed in it sincerely, believed in these ideas of “pure” nationalism. There are others, who up to this day, I am satisfied that they are absolute rogues in it, merely used it because it was popular. It was easier to defend wild “pure” African nationalism than the more complicated and intricate forms of tactics and rallying of different groups. That's more difficult, it is a more difficult task. It requires what-you-call; I mean anybody can run out into the streets in Orlando and shout “I'm absolutely pure—“ (laughter) This is a tape! I nearly said “to the moon with whites”! That is very easy; that's very easy. I think they were running away from any productive....

*In which of those two camps would you have put Leballo at the time? The rogues, or the dedicated—the believers?*

*Sub judice*, isn't it? (laughter) I say this is locally *sub judice*! [P. K. Leballo at this time was a state witness in a case against alleged coup plotters in Tanzania.] And this character in question! (laughter).

*What did you make of him at the time, trying to forget?—*

I thought he was an absolute fraud! I could only say this only after this [Tanzanian] trial is over. I still think he is a rogue. But as I say, this matter, this one is *sub judice* here. You know there is a trial on in which his character is being... and I wouldn't like to...

*Yes, you know this was not covered in the Kenyan press. This is a digression, about this evidence of his arrests and convictions in South Africa. What was the case that they were bringing up? I never heard what it was.*

I don't know, but I suppose it is because in any court of law you can attack the character of a witness.

*You don't remember what specific past arrest or whatever it was they were citing?*

I know, but I fear to speak here, this case is a very delicate one.

*Do you want me to turn it off?*

---Interruption---

[There was evidence brought by the defence to impugn Leballo's character as a witness; it had to do with a mutiny of troops during World War II, where evidently some of those involved were executed. Leballo managed to get off and not serve any sentence as a result of the mutiny. And he said that the gist of the evidence was to show that time and again, a group of people had gotten into trouble because of Leballo and had all taken the rap and Leballo had escaped unscathed.]

*How did he manage to gather this following in Orlando, and why was it in Orlando and not somewhere else that this group formed up?*

Particularly! Perhaps it was only in Orlando, because he was staying in Orlando, and this following was not a mass following, it was just a group of young students. I think our Youth League there did not have more than 30 members. And of those he probably got ten. As I said, this extreme nationalism attracted young people very much, and [if] you yelled a few slogans against the Whites and a few against Moscow you looked a very big hero. If you could shout at the whole powerful White establishment, and the Whites as such, use a few swear words—

*The press then proceeded to describe him as of 1954 or so as the Youth League Chairman of Orlando. What was the story?*

No, that was not correct. The truth about it is that he established his group. I should indicate that in our absence he managed to collect a few of his supporters, and he even expelled us from the branch, the Youth League branch, whilst we were secretaries to the province. And that was it; but it did not last for long. Because there was a national conference forthcoming, and in the national conference the whole matter of the Orlando branch was put forward and in turn they got themselves kicked out. The adherents of Leballo mainly operated a sort of dissident little group of his in Orlando. But I think Orlando (laugh). The use of the word Orlando is rather unfortunate—within the complex of Soweto— South of the whole complex around Orlando there, you know there is some 28 ANC branches.

*Within only the part known as Orlando, or within Soweto?*

Within Orlando there are four. The whole Soweto, altogether there were 28.

*Skiping to something else, one of the contentious things that was often raised in a very propagandistic tone in the PAC literature, or at that stage Africanist literature, was the mechanism of the Consultative Committee within the Congress Alliance. And it is almost impossible to get an accurate picture of the true functioning of that body. Can you explain to me what the Consultative Committee was, and what its functions were? And what its position was in the total scheme?*

Well, it was, as its name says, a national consultative committee. Its origins really, not its origins, but it took various different forms and different shapes during the different campaigns. During the Defiance Campaign, which was a campaign jointly run by the ANC and the Indian Congress, we had a national Action Council which was necessary to coordinate the work of the two organizations, to have exchanges of views and so on. And this was done by the National Action Council. A body co-ordinating two independent organizations, you know. And working out plans in a common struggle. Well, the National Action Council subsequently, you know, had the preparations for the Freedom Charter and so on.

*This was the same body that was carried over from the Defiance Campaign?*

Almost; in form, but not quite, but the concept of coordination. Now it had been joined by the COD, and so on. And the concept of coordination found— yes, I think it was still called the National Action Council for the coordination of the Congress of the People. That also worked out coordinating action and action programs and plans. But each of the organizations was always entitled to discuss. Usually the plans originated from the organizations, either the ANC, COD, or SAIC. Subsequently it was SACTU also, and the Women's Federation. Now most of the time, at

any rate, it was the ANC which piloted the proposals. And the very fact that it was the ANC that had the large mass membership, and mass action, it proposed things and put suggestions as to how the others can fit in.

*For instance an anti-pass campaign; the ANC would come with its proposals, and say look now—*

---Interruption---

*When you say that the decisions came or the proposals came mostly from the ANC and were presented to the other groups, was it the National Executive of the ANC that was formulating these proposals?*

Yes, yes, it was the National Executive but more the Working Committee. The National Executive Committee, you know, met, but the body of action was the Working Committee.

*How often did the working committee meet?*

Well, what would I say now? Heavens; it met very often, but it was always in Johannesburg. Sometimes, as the situation calls upon, sometimes very frequently—tense situations—very, very frequently.

*And how often did the Consultative committee meet?*

Whenever there was an issue to discuss.

*Just on an ad hoc basis?*

Yes, yes. Once for instance there was a campaign on, it met more often; and if there was no campaign on, it hardly met. It didn't need to meet. Sometimes the proposals even came from SACTU itself, the pound-a-day campaign, and so on. And how to coordinate. But naturally one would say that the other bodies didn't have much to propose. The forms of action which the SAIC could take—

*Were limited.*

Were limited. If they were thinking of a national strike, and called upon us to join them by having a hartal, that type of thing. And the COD then would either come out or it was just natural. It is surprising that people get the Impression that— Sometimes I think this is a distortion which is being put that the ANC was being led by other bodies. I mean, the poor COD representative could hardly come and say, you know comrades, I think that today there should be a huge nationalist— (laughter). Not even from their experience or their assessment of the political situation. They were incapable of assessing the situation. It was the ANC which had these numerous branches all over the world— all over the country, which got reports on its branches which suggested one thing or the other. So it was just a ridiculous sense of —

---Interruption---

*Was there much informal contact between the people who were representatives on this body? Or did they only see each other at the meetings?*

No, there was a constant informal contact all the time. Not only representatives, but I mean, I could just stroll into the COD offices, or the officials of the COD stroll into my office, and similarly all of them. Informal contact was there. It was an alliance, an ANC Congress alliance in the fullest sense.

*What constraints were there on the people who were banned? How limited were their activities actually, once they were banned? Or did they continue to participate, say in the formulation of the proposals that were coming from the ANC? Or were there people who were banned who were more or less carrying on as ever?*

Naturally we could hardly ever accept the restrictions imposed on us by the fascists, and we found such ways and means of participating as fully as we can. We constantly adopted that attitude of never accepting it. And of course you find means of neutralizing that, I mean, you can't agree to sentence our people to perpetual silence, particularly the cream of the leadership. We just could not accept the position.

*It seems to me that there is some evidence that in the 50s, I do not know how accurate that is, that's why I am asking you, but that there was a certain rigidity in the ANC because of the fact that so many men were banned and yet continued to be acknowledged as the leaders of the organization. Given the situation where no one wanted to appear disloyal to these original real leaders you have a situation develop where it was impossible to get real new blood in the leadership. And that perhaps this is one reason why the Africanists or the people who were opposed to the policies of the ANC felt frustrated in trying to put their line across. Do you think there is any truth in saying that a sort of ossification had set in?*

No, I think to be honest, let's be honest about this. The first people to be banned and struck-off the African National Congress were the communists. The members of the Communist Party were the first people to be struck. And if anybody felt any frustration, it was not so much the fact that there's new blood. Why should we wait for the fascists to remove our people? There were normal channels of removing a leader in our organization, conferences, and so on. We didn't have to wait for bans from the enemy to say— as if one was glorifying, happy that the enemy had found a new method of removing certain people. If any people were happy or unhappy about the participation of certain people, then they were happy for entirely different reasons than new blood, into the organization, through normal conferences. The organization was not banned, and we did not have to wait for the enemy to remove and silence our people. In fact at that stage we were... But if one had some anti-communist feelings he would probably find a little clarification or justification, happiness in the removal of a communist. But I think it was only extremely anti-communist elements at that stage. No, I don't think that any frustration was justified.

*Do you think that this anti-communist phobia was the main thrust behind the Africanists?*

At least so they said themselves, so they said. That was what they attacked the Alliance for.

*You don't think that was just a front for something else that they believed?*

Well, I don't know. They counter-posed "pure" African Nationalism on communism. They said communism watered it down. And that the class struggle wasn't there or anything; and that we should not import foreign ideas. Because again this idea of having something which was specifically African, and communism was a "foreign" idea which we were importing, and we had allied ourselves with "foreign" elements, which weakened the force and dynamism of this. I think

there was something behind this and perhaps one still has to find the reasons for this trend, as I say. But on the face of it, this is what the position was.

*Earlier you said you thought Mda had some kind of phobia about communism. Did you have any clue what the origins of that phobia were, in his personality or his background or anything?*

I don't know, unless his religion perhaps had something to do with it, I really don't know.

*One can speculate but no one really knows.*

Yes, but sometimes it has.

*Were you at the Transvaal Conference of November 1st and 2nd 1958, where the Africanists staged their walk-out?*

No, I wasn't, I was then banned. But I was watching the conference, Mr. Tambo was there.

*Even though you weren't there, obviously you were interested in what was happening. How did you evaluate their strength at that stage, when they broke away?*

Weak. And I thought the fact that they broke away was a clear demonstration of their complete frustration within the ANC. They had been a great nuisance and instrumental for a long time in trying to disrupt and upset. They attacked the Freedom Charter which was the foundation document of the ANC with a view of getting it retracted, they failed. And in utter desperation, there were about ninety, nineteen of them in a huge conference... And they walked off, to strike it out alone and I thought this was the very act of moving out of the ANC [that] demonstrated a complete failure over many years in the ANC to get it to adopt this puerile and infantile policy.

*You say they had been a nuisance over several years; what was the general strategy of the leadership for dealing with this nuisance?*

To let the masses, just give the masses the rein of dealing with them, that's all. Giving the masses the rein of dealing with them in conferences, and debating and defeating them. And making sure that the masses choose for themselves their own leaders. And incidentally, not even one got on the provincial leadership of the ANC; not even Leballo. Up to the time that he broke away he remained a branch— (self-appointed?) something.

*Did he ever stand for election to the provincial—?*

Of course, yes; I mean this was a whole bid for leadership. Not even stand, because nomination. It was his greatest desire! There can be no doubt; to arrest the leadership from the so-called misled—

*“Charterists”.*

“Charterists”. I think he must have aspired in his deep heart for the presidency. And as I have already said it, it is always awkward to be talking about Leballo, in this atmosphere. I find it rather inhibits me!

*To try to remember ten years ago—*

Yes, yes, and what else to remember today too!

*The efforts of the Africanists to get themselves legally elected to office in the ANC. I know the ANC always accused them of being position-seekers, and so forth, and I am sure there must be a kernel of truth in that. But do you recall any specific instances of conferences where the Africanists tried to get themselves legally elected to things and what ensued?*

No, they tried more than getting themselves elected, there is much more than that. Their vicious attacks on the leadership, unwarranted criticism of it, tends to show that in many instances—take the Transvaal conference of 1954—that the leadership was merely the instruments of Moscow, that type of thing. It goes even far more than constitutionally— It is... for a complete change of the leadership; they'd impose themselves then at those conferences, through this agitation, through this organization. As the alternate leadership.

When you start challenging the whole policy of an organization from its very roots, you don't have to be saying "elect me" thereafter. And to be unfair to those leaders is to be unworthy completely of leadership, completely unworthy. And the final act of having failed to get the policies changed, having failed to completely discredit those leaders and to occupy the positions, of walking out and forming a new organization, surely! It's the most, clearest demonstration. Not only were they now seeking for the leadership of an organization, but were also now seeking for leadership of the struggle. I don't think one needs proof of their canvassing which would be difficult in a conference, which is a free conference, of saying they canvassed so many people. They were looking for more than just positions in leadership, but a complete take-over.

*Did you think they had much strength outside the Transvaal? How would you assess their strength as of the end of 1958 or so, outside the Transvaal?*

I think that they had some, to be objective, they had some sympathizers and strong, fairly—fair group in the universities; perhaps in Fort Hare they had some sympathizers among the young men; perhaps in the Eastern Cape they had some. In the Western Cape more...

*What was your assessment of Sobukwe's strength or weaknesses as a leader? Did you take him seriously? Or what was your view of him?*

Well, I mean, Sobukwe was a very eloquent leader. He joined, incidentally, we recruited him into the ANC at Fort Hare. After forming this branch, we made him the spokesman of the branch, and he was a very eloquent man, very impressive, and subsequently, during the Defiance Campaign, and shortly thereafter, his active political work sort of went down to an ebb. He came back after a lot of persuasion, and became a branch chairman. I don't know if this also affected his ideas; one of the branches of the 28. He never rose to any other position. I think from that—

*Had he not been a national official of the Youth League at an earlier point?*

Earlier, yes. But when he returned to politics he—

*How active was he when he was Secretary? I think he was Secretary of the Youth League. Was he active?*

No, no, not secretary. I can't remember when he was national secretary.

*Under Pitje I think.*

At that stage there was a bit of—

*About 1950 or so, after he finished Fort Hare. I think he was.*

Perhaps yes, but Pitje was a bit of a dim era in the Youth league.

*A bit of a what?*

Dim era.

*Not so much of an activist.*

Yes. The ANC after this—I think it is because of the activity which the ANC engaged in after the 1949 era. So I am not so—I can't really remember Sobukwe's activities; I don't. Perhaps Gwendolen [Carter] has got material on it.

*You said he was eloquent as a public speaker—*

Yes, but I didn't think him very profound. I didn't think, frankly, very profound.

*What weaknesses did you think he had?*

(Laughter) Well, I couldn't say now; I think it is hardly fair for a man who has gone through so much suffering.

*Fairness aside—*

Yes, I know; the political historian!

*Remembering in 1959, let's say, what assessment you made of this rival is rather historically important. And in fairness I wonder what the ANC—*

Yes, but it is politically—

*Untactful.*

Politically tactful, yes. Historians it is true are chasing after the truth; I must mix the truth with such forms of conduct on my part which might not jeopardise the achievement of an objective (Laughter)— Yes I appreciate your question.

*I appreciate your answer. Were you at any point after the break-away of the Africanists, or the starting up of the PAC, did you or Tambo or any of the other leaders of the ANC. Did you consider making any efforts to bring about a reunion or reconciliation with the Africanists?*

Well, our external mission, I think it's now well known.

*I don't mean after Sharpeville, I mean between their breakaway and—*

It was hardly— It was only nine months, nine months; just about a year. No, there were no— after all, they walked out of conference, saying that they were going to— And in April they

founded themselves. In December they walked out, and started on their own; I mean, they did precisely what we anticipated, which was to concentrate more on attacking the African National Congress. And this is what we said in our statement then, that we are going to be used to try to increase the attacks on the ANC. So they did that, and did not participate. We carried on with our programme, the boycotts and so on, which they criticised. We were then in the thick of the anti-pass campaign, which they also criticised, saying that they wouldn't tackle individual laws; they would rather have a complete and total revolution. And we thought they were just one of those groups which developed over the period of the history of the African National Congress, and we should just go on.

However, after the [1960] detentions and during the detentions, efforts— Although they were a very small minority, efforts were made on the initiative of the ANC to call the African leaders of all groups to close ranks. This is how... Many conferences which you know. More so the formation of the external United Front. They are all there. And it is now pretty well known. They never adhered to any agreements. They broke off, and continued their attacks.

*This is a very vague question but it is a rather central one. You say that in the period just before Sharpeville there was no particular effort to bring the two organizations together again, because you say they were proceeding with their own effort to create revolution.*

No, no, not to create revolution; they were proceeding with their own efforts of finding their feet, defining what an African was; they were preoccupied with who is an African and who is not an African; and also attacking the campaigns which the ANC was then busily engaged in—the anti-pass campaign. There was really no need; the situation did not call for—

*Was there any sense that the PAC was more militant than the ANC?*

I don't know where that comes from honestly, frankly, I just don't understand; it is a sort of a historical blow which occurs over things, development of organizations, either deliberately by design and distortion, or I don't understand; people call them militant; what does militant mean? They had hardly embarked on any action. You know what action they embarked upon during 1959? It was the status campaign. A campaign to have Africans addressed as Sir or Mrs. in the shops and having those shops listed in a directory, I didn't think that was more militant than the potato-boycott, or even more militant than the anti-pass struggle. The word militant loses its meaning if you examine what precisely the PAC was doing during that time. What was it doing?

It seems the so-called Sharpeville business too, was called more militant and even violent, I don't know. That does not show that. Sobukwe wrote and distinctly made it clear that his campaign was going to be nonviolent. Now history suddenly has it, and we are constantly confronted with this, and I don't understand. I think if people will say they were more militant, they had better say, well, we have looked through the history and they did this and this, which we consider was more militant than what the ANC ever did. Then one could interpret it. Otherwise it is difficult, I don't know what people mean by militant.

*I think what most people mean, although I acknowledge that they don't bring it out, is that their ideology is aimed at a total overthrow of White government. And a replacement of it by a totally black government. Whereas the ANC had, in this respect, a more moderate policy of replacing white government perhaps with some kin, of a multi-racial scheme. I think that is what the phrase militant comes from. But I agree with you that in the actions they took they never achieved—*

I mean, I wouldn't ever be able to find a more militant program than the Freedom Charter. Perhaps this was one reason why the South African government decided to charge us with treason and keep us in the treason trial for five years. I wouldn't find— I doubt if there is any political organization anywhere, even the then unliberated states, which had a more militant program than the—I mean more militant outlook than the Freedom Charter. Politically, economically and otherwise, I didn't know even up to this day, what the PAC 's political program is, and if this idea of militancy holds, complete black government. Well, they must have changed their ideas a million times since then, because I notice they have done what not even the ANC has done. To have had Patrick Duncan as their spokesman in the what-you-call; no, not the OAU, that is the same time when he appeared in 1963. A black government of pure nationalism; I would question that.

*I think that after 1960 that they were in a confused state, to say the least.*

I wonder how confused they were even to begin with.

*I don't want to seem to be looking for things that aren't there, but I'd be very interested in your assessment of the whole general condition of the ANC in the late 1950's. Were you, as a leader—I know you were banned and so forth— but still you were in a position to influence the organization. How satisfied were you with the internal strength of the ANC, say in 1958 or 59? What did you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the ANC then? I'm trying to get a picture of the state of things at about that stage of the political development. Can you remember? That was the end of the first phase of the Treason Trial, but not yet the end of the trial.*

I thought that at that stage the ANC was preparing itself again, having readjusted itself to the new situation which had virtually made it semi-illegal, with gathering again strength and momentum once more for another confrontation with the government. I think one will remember that that was the period of the anti-pass campaign of 1959. In '58, in May? We had a mammoth conference in Johannesburg on the pass issue. Chief Luthuli was banned when he was coming to that conference. I recall the 26th June that year too, I was on the way to address a meeting which subsequently turned out to be 75,000 strong in Durban. And I was banned on the way. There was mass agitation against the pass laws and that was the year when we called for a potato-boycott, as one step towards a sharp conflict which we were preparing for 1960; I thought the ANC was rather...

*Do you think that without police intimidation the 1958 Stay-At-Home would have been more successful?*

Yes, I think so—I also think that some tactical mistakes were made there, which were admitted. Instead of calling out boldly, calling upon the people to strike and calling them in the name of the ANC, we had formed some ad-hoc body under whose name the strike was called, which confused the people. I think we realised that mistake afterwards and said that in the future we must not under any circumstances whatsoever, even if it meant possibly exposing the leadership to arrest, call these strikes under the name which the people know.

END