

Interview with Harry Gwala conducted by Tony Karon at
Dambuza, Pietermaritzburg, on Sunday January 

TK: So corn, could you tell us about your history and how you came into the struggle?

Harry Gwala: Well, my history is maybe interesting in its own way, you know. I grew up in an environment of poverty. I was staying with my mother's people. They were very poor there - rural areas, New Hanover.

I remember in winter, you know, my grandmother and other women used to go out and do casual labour for the farmers, stripping wattle bark. And they used to wrap their feet with rags against the frost bite.

They used to get up very early in the morning. We didn't have a clock, so I couldn't say what time it was, but I knew it was very very early, because after they left I would go to sleep again for quite a long time.

I remember one memorable day when what was left for seed was consumed because there was no food whatsoever. The price of wattle bark had suddenly taken a plunge, and everything was more or less chaotic. I only came to know afterwards that that was the time of depression. Although I didn't have any theory about it, I knew it practically.

Then, when I grew up, at about the age of 12, I went to my father's place. My father was a well-to-do peasant, as it were - he was hiring other people to do casual labour for him, and so on. But he was a cripple.

Despite all that he did not want to feel that he was helpless, so he tried to do something for himself. Money for good things was not there. There was only money for essentials.

That type of life left its own impression on my mind. But it was not until I went to Adams College that I met students who were discussing political questions, and I would listen to them with great amazement, because they knew things we didn't know.

For what it was worth then, Dr Brooke introduced something that was not in the syllabus - that was 'Civics'. We were learning about local government, and Provincial government, learning about the country's government, the state. In that crude idea one got some inkling of what was happening, because Dr Brooke was also a Senator representing a 'native', as it was called, constituency.

It was when I settled down in Pietermaritzburg that I came across the left literature, people were discussing left politics. There was a bookshop..., there was a restaurant in Retief Street that was selling left literature, and was selling *The Guardian*.² *The Guardian* introduced me to politics, as I learned to understand it then.

There were books, there were booklets and discussions I would attend at the People's Hall. There was a hall, a dilapidated hall called the people's hall. That was where we had our meetings.

Through that... - that was in 1942... -

TK' What were the meetings? Party meetings?

HG: Political meetings.

TK' Under what organisation?

HG: The United Front³ - it was a United Front against war.

TK' Dr Dadoo...

HG: Yes, but then the Soviet Union was then engaged in the war, and the United Front, instead of being an anti-war organisation, it was now popularising the struggle against fascism, the war effort.

Then, those discussions introduced me to the Party. I joined the Party in 1942, and there were some other friends - I don't know what happened to them subsequently, but they've just vanished. I was teaching then, and I began to conduct political discussions at school.

There were two young men who were very brilliant. They were in Standard 7, and they were keen students in this political discussion, as they had been keen in their school work. Then I recruited them into the Party.

One was Agrippa Ngcobo, and another was Moses Mabhida⁴ (laughs). Yes, Agrippa Ngcobo just disappeared. I don't know what happened to him. I haven't seen him since 1942. But Moses was to stay on and become a very important comrade; important in that he did a lot of work both in the trade unions and the ANC, it was after the Party was banned.

In 1944, the Party asked me to leave teaching and do trade union work. So I started with the Distributive Workers, organising the distributive workers. We later organised the sweet workers, then the rubber workers at Howick; in the early SOs the municipal workers as well.

The ANC hardly existed in Natal. The Natal Province had broken away from the national body to form the Natal ANC under the leadership of the first president of the ANC, Dr Dube. The ANC was being revived in Natal nationally. This was in 1944. Dr Dube was an old sick man, and people who were competing for leadership were AWG Champion of the ICU, one Reverend Abner Mtimkulu who was then Natal Provincial President. I remember at that conference Mtimkulu and his executive staged a walk-out, with Chief Luthuli at that meeting. Chief Luthuli stayed on... Champion took over. In

fact he literally 'seized power' (laughs) Yes, and became Provincial President. His ticket was that of taking back the Natal branch into the national organisation, which was a good thing. Chief Luthuli remained to be elected as an executive member of the ANC.

TK: Had you joined the ANC already by then?

HG: I joined the ANC then. I joined at a meeting in Maritzburg when Ch am

➤ And was the Party keen for people to join Congress?

HG: The Party was, the Party was. In fact when I attended the Party school in 1943, we were encouraged to join the ANC and also participate in the trade unions. But I didn't have a clear idea of what trade unions were, and there was hardly ANC in Natal. It was a strange organisation of chiefs. It was chiefs that were running the affairs there, and some clergy.

But they were explaining to me the importance of a national movement, to participate together with the Party which was engaged in the class struggle, and the trade unions which were more concerned with shop-floor programmes. And it was when I had a better idea of why one should become a member of the national movement that I joined it in 1944.

Then..., mind you, these are not organised thoughts, I'm just saying things as they come to mind.

Then, there was the question now of the Youth League. When I attended the Party school in 1943 as I said, I found the comrades there discussing the problems of organising the African Youth. There was the Young Communist League, but the Indian comrades and white comrades were having a problem in getting to the townships in Johannesburg, in the Transvaal.

It was not like Natal. You know they were very strict on people not living in townships entering the townships then. I remember an occasion when we visited Springs - Thema in Springs. I didn't have a pass, and they were demanding the pass at the gate.

I was going to speak at a meeting, and could not get into the location because there was the gate there. What they did was to ask me to lie down, and covered me with their legs and great coats. So, that was how I got into the location. Now this was the problem that the comrades who were not living in these... in particular the white comrades and the Indian comrades.

So they felt that the best way to organise the African youth was to form an organisation of young people among the Africans, who would liaise with the League, the Young Communist League. Ruth^s was a young girl then, but she was very active in the youth organisation.

Then they told me they had three people who were very keen, and were very progressive, but they singled out Walter as somebody who was very important in organising youth then. I didn't know Walter Sisulu then. I was told about him. It was Walter Sisulu and two other people whose names I've forgotten now. I think one was Malanga.

In Natal, the idea of the Youth League had not spread, because there was the problem of organising the ANC itself. So there were some people who were concerned with the youth. It was Jordan Ngubane, it was Reggie Moses and it was H.I.E. Dhlomo - Herbert - who was with the newspaper *Ilanga lace Natal* and a poet, and a very capable somebody.

They tried to organise something, but it couldn't take off. So it was not until 1947 that Percy Khumalo came from Johannesburg. He had a shop there, and he tried to organise seriously the Youth League. We were drawn in and we held our conference in 1948. I don't use the present day standards, because it was a conference nominally - there was... I don't think we touched a hundred If we were 50, it was a huge number.

So we formed the first real youth organisation in Natal. Jordan Ngubane was President. I was his vice-President. And there was M.B. Yengwa who became our Provincial Secretary. But Jordan Ngubane vanished from the scene. I don't know what happened to him.

TI(He came and joined Inkatha...

HG: There wasn't any Inkatha then. He was an opportunist. He pitched up in the Liberal Party. Then, when the Progressive Party was formed, apparently he also pitched up there.

TK' Can I ask there about the Youth League. Wasn't the Youth League quite opposed to the Party being in Congress?

HG: That's an interesting question. The Youth League was... I don't know whether to call it racist, but when it expanded, it caught up with it what I would call the elite. By elite I mean the educated section of the African people. And those were mostly at Fort Hare.

And then there other young people in the Youth League, who came into the organisation in the days of its formation. Among them was Anton Lembede. He had his friend, Mda...

A.P..

HG: Yes, that's right. They were pursuing rather... I don't know whether it was actually a line, but it was very conservative. They didn't have room in their hearts for the Party. Among the young generation too, I don't know how many were broad-minded enough to see the need of working with the Party.

They were more interested in an exclusively African thing. There had been that slogan going around, then - I don't know whether it was heard before, but when I opened my eyes to politics, I came across this slogan "Africa for the Africans". Then "Africa for the Africans, Africans for the World" was the slogan.

The first time I heard it was from Chief himself when I was a student at Adams. I don't know whether it was the slogan of the Pan African movement in Africa - not the Pan Africanists, but the African movement as distinct from the Africanist organisation.

So, there was that silent hostility. In fact, I am told and I have no reason to disbelieve it, that there was a time when the Youth League would not have J.B. Marks as President General of the ANC, so much so that they went out of their way to prevent his presidency by going to organise Dr Moroka at Thaba Nchu that night and giving him a membership card which he did not possess. Things were as bad as all that.

In Natal, my executive was led by Ngubane, who was not just negative but hostile to the Party, and incidentally to the Indian people. I remember the quarrel we had during the 1949 riots when they were making anti-Indian pronouncements. One meeting, in fact, I even decided to walk out of because I could not stomach the racist approach. But they were not the Youth League, so one could not walk away from the organisation. Things were as bad as all that.

I don't know about the Cape, but Natal was reactionary; Transvaal was bad, bad. But credit must go to the Party members who went out of their way to first accommodate these people, and then embark on a campaign of educating them to real politics, which they did successfully.

These were the 40s now. I don't know if you want me to go further than that...

TK' Yah, I'd like to hear about the 50s and even after, your time in prison and so on. And then there's some things I'd like to come back to about the 40s...

HG: As I told you, I attended the first Party school in 1943. I was still a teacher then. Then after that school, I was charged with propagating communism in school. There was a departmental enquiry, but I was exonerated. That was at the opening of the season in 1944 - that's the year I also resigned from teaching, mid-year I resigned from teaching.

TK' What was that Party school? How did it work? How long were you therefor, anc..

HG: For a month. They organised schools, Party schools... because I understand that that was not the first one - they had organised some other Party

schools. And I remember attending another one in Cape Town - a Party school, they called it a 'summer school', but this was after the conference, I think it was the 1944 conference, or 1945 - I'm not so sure of the year now, which I also attended.

Among those who were conducting those classes in Cape Town was Jack Simons. In Johannesburg it was Eli Weinberg, Yusuf Dadoo, one comrade they called Hope - he was an ex-serviceman... Who else was there? Oh yes, yes. Violet Weinberg, Eli's wife. She was taking us on book-keeping. And da...

TK' Bernstein?

HG: We called her Hilda Watts then. They were the prominent ones who were conducting those school classes then.

TK' And what was taught?

HG: Yah, it was... We were taught trade unionism, we were taught the theory of national liberation. Then we were taught Marxism-Leninism. Those are the things I still remember. Public speaking - Hilda was concerned with public speaking. I remember there was one comrade who was also a school teacher, from East Rand - I think he was from Springs, but I'm not sure now which...

TK' David Bopape?

HG: No, no, it was not David. It was Mashabane. He was said to have done very well in public speaking. But, we never saw him again. He vanished just like that. He vanished as he came.

And on trade unionism we used to go out to factory meetings and address workers. Yes.

TK' And that was a leadership training thing - the Party was building a level of leadership?

HG: It was, yes, it was.

TK' Were there any people who were with you on those courses who are still playing a central role in the struggle?

HG: Unfortunately not. Have you heard of Naboth Mokgatle?

TIC: Yes, I've read his book

HG: You have. He was there with us. After the school I even went to Pretoria to visit the workers out there. He took me around. Then, the next thing I heard was that he had left the country.

I haven't read his book - I understand he's written a book or two.

IX: He's written hr's own story - autobiography...

HG: Oh yes. No, I haven't read that.

Unfortunately others were consumed by liquor, and others just disappeared, I don't know what happened.

TK And what was the main work of the Party before the war ended?

HG: The main work of the Party, as far as I can remember, was organising trade unions, particularly. The people who took a leading part in the ANC were senior members like Moses Kotane, like J.B. Marks, like Edwin Mofutsanyana.

I say so because at the ANC meetings I used to attend, I remember two in particular which left an indelible impression in my mind. It was a crisis conference called by the ANC after the mineworkers strike, the African mineworkers strike. The NRC walked out of the Chamber in Pretoria. The Executive called a special conference.

Mda... Lembede was there, Mda was there, a lot of intellectuals. But, the conference was dominated by Moses. I remember Dr Xuma saying that he wanted to raise a question. Referring to Moses, he said "I don't want to challenge Joe Louis" (laughs).

Because with all their law and philosophy, people like Lembede were no match for Moses.

It was another conference again. This one, the crisis conference, was held at Bloemfontein in 1946, August 1946. And the other conference was held I think the same year, or the following year, 1947, in Johannesburg. It was "Votes for All", and there were these intellectuals trying to kick up a hell of a row, and Moses took care of them (laughs).

So, Moses always left a mark in my mind. Like Jack Simons - I loved to hear Jack Simons speak at Party meetings, because he gripped you with every word that he said. Yes.

These were the 40s. I've more or less covered the 40s.

TKIs it true to say that in the 40s the Party came to see the nation-alliberation struggle as its primary task or that the road to socialism in South Africa was through a national liberation struggle?

HG: I don't think so, unless it was in the time before I joined the Party. I don't think the Party ever put it that way. The Party, as far as I am aware, organised the people on the basis of fighting for socialism. But the Party said "in the struggle for socialism, we cannot just theorise. We have got to take the objective conditions in each single country." And what were the objective conditions in South Africa? The Party constitution which contained the programme of the 40s - I don't remember what year that programme was, but I think it was about 1942 or so - while putting socialism as the main task of the Party, the Party did say that in the conditions of South Africa it is necessary to have close cooperation between the working class and the national movement, because the South African struggle was intertwined.

The primary task of the Party has always been that of overthrowing capitalism and proceeding to socialism, but there is no straight path to that. You have got to pass through, in other countries, a number of stages. In South Africa two. One of the stages was that of the national democratic struggle, which would remove oppression - there was no apartheid then, but there was certainly discrimination, and it received various names; among them 'colour bar', among them 'racial discrimination' and so forth.

There were people who were not workers, but who were affected by racial discrimination. People like lawyers, doctors, small shop-keepers (and that was by the way the only occupation open to Africans who wanted to become business people - they were most shop keepers). These people had to be brought in, because they were nationalists, some of them very good nationalists. So there was that (word inaudible) of bringing together the working people and nationalists.

At the same time, the Party did not end there. Despite the fact that there was white domination, the Party never tired to say "we must go to the white people and try and get them over to the struggle. Its a working class party - we must have white workers". Unfortunately, the set-up in South Africa was such that the white workers were bought over by capital at the expense of the black workers, and they were always thinking with their stomachs.

Unlike the early days of the late 19th Century and the beginning of this century, when workers campaigned for May Day and organised strikes, and even had May Day... most firms observing May Day, they abandoned all that. They totally abandoned the struggle.

The South African Trades and Labour Council ended up by surrendering, abandoning the banner of the working class in the trade unions, so that people who came around were mostly white intellectuals. The white workers deserted their own fellow workers.

TK What was the effect of the banning of the Party on the struggle in South Africa?

HG: You won't believe it; the Party had foresight. You remember when they proposed the law banning the Party? They didn't call it the Suppression of Communism Bill. They called it the Unlawful Organisations Bill, and the Party came up with a very precise analysis of that Bill.

It first came out with a book called *Malanazi Madness in South Africa*. It was a booklet later banned by the Nats. It was translated into Zulu - I did the translation here (laughs). I was in Durban then, where I was Party organiser and local chairman.

The Party said "we are faced not just with a Nationalist Government. Its apartheid". Apartheid had never been defined then. It was something very vague. People were pronouncing it in different ways. This apartheid was even... was also there in South Africa. It was not very clear what this monster was.

So the Party said "we are entering now a period of fascism in South Africa. This Unlawful Organisations Bill is not only aimed at the Communists, but it is aimed at everything democratic in this country. The Nats have taken over from their masters - the Nazi's of Germany. After all even during the war, they were sabotaging the war effort, not only sympathising with Nazi Germany but siding with it. Now that they are in power they are going to suppress everything that is opposing the Government."

I remember that caption they had. They had a big boot trampling over the people, but the people were rising and resisting that boot.

When they realised that other people other than Communists were raising their ire against this Unlawful Organisations Bill, they immediately changed it to the Suppression of Communism Bill. But still the Party had explained that in Germany the same thing happened: first communists, and then finally everybody.

So what I see today rings a bell in my mind about what the Party was saying, and all that the Party said is happening just as the Party said it. And those who... I remember one day, one woman who was working in an office was telling me that "you are sorry now that you are a Communist". I said to her "many people will be sorry for what they are". And she said, talking to other girls there at the office "yes, I think he's right".

We are facing a monster, and a monster doesn't end by gobbling a few people, a monster gobbles everybody. So that now, we were entering a new era, an era of fascism, at the beginning of the SOs.

The banning of the Party. I remember when these two measures were discussed: it was the Suppression of Communism Bill, and the Group Areas

Bill. Now, the only people who stood up to oppose these were the Party, the South African Indian Congress, and the ANC. The Coloured People's Congress was more or less moribund. There were joint meetings where we went throughout the country explaining these threats and rallying the people around. That was when we held the first national stoppage of work in South Africa, on June 26, 1950.

While there were these three organisations, the Party was banned just before this rally. By the time this rally was being held, the stoppage of work, the Party was already declared an unlawful organisation. I remember a huge meeting organised in Durban, addressed by the President then who was Dr Moroka - I was his interpreter. It was the biggest meeting we held at Red Square - the attendance there was wonderful.

When we decided to stay away, there again, the Natal President reneged - AWG Champion - he was against the stayaway. So that it was now, in Natal, led by the Indian Congress. Dr Naicker was there - he was our senior comrade in our campaign - the Indian Congress and the Youth League. It was where the Youth League played a very important part. Now that cost AWG Champion his seat as President.

It was a very interesting meeting at the end of the year when Champion was ousted from leadership. It was held at the YMCA. Only delegates were allowed to attend, so delegates were there. There was a substantial delegation. Now, after making his deliveries and so on, then he called for nominations.

His clique nominated him, but the Youth League immediately nominated Chief. He (Champion) came out with this tirade now saying that Chief Luthuli had no business coming to contest leadership of the ANC. After all, Chief Luthuli was a servant of the state, and he was an old leader - that is he, Champion - and had paid for his leadership with his own life and blood. And now here was Chief Luthuli coming to contest what was not his.

Then he said, now telling people how to vote, all those who are for the ANC on one side. And all those who are for Chief Luthuli one side. (Laughs). And then, people were for Chief Luthuli. People were for Chief Luthuli, of the ANC. So, he lost the vote.

He called for the vote again, announcing the same thing. He lost. So, what he did was to go and open the doors, and everyone was allowed in. And there was a big protest at that, but he said "no, you can't protest. You say you stand for the masses. We want the masses to come and decide".

So when the people filled the hall, he explained to them what it was about. Then he said "all those for Chief Luthuli, and all those for the ANC". And still he lost - people voted for Chief Luthuli of the ANC, and he lost his presidency. That was the end of him.

I don't know if I'm right, but in the national organisation, if people held of flee, they only thought of their office. Once they lost that office, they also disappeared from the scene. They wouldn't come back to be led by other people.

So, now we were gearing for ourselves for a militant leadership of the ANC, in the face of the fascist threat in the country. In fact, the June 26 1950 stayaway was the beginning of the implementation of the Programme of Action which had been adopted in Kimberley, and finalised at Bloemfontein. So that it was being implemented now to oppose fascism.

This was followed by the Defiance Campaign. What else can I say?

***IX** It would be nice to hear about your work during the 1950s personally, in SACTU and so on. Even also what Moses Mabhida and your other comrades were doing. And through into the 1960s, the Islam..*

HG: When the Party was banned, there were many comrades who just vanished from the scene. And, we were working by intuition, more or less. So when we started the real industrial union I organised at the time - I should have mentioned that during the 40s I was also engaged as organiser of the Chemical Workers Union. At the end of the 40s I went down to Durban to become organiser of the Textile Workers Union.

The point now I'm trying to bring up here is that of industrial workers. The real industrial workers were at Howick, besides the textile workers and the chemical workers. There was a very huge number of industrial workers concentrated in one place - at Howick. Over 1000. In those days, that was a big number. So, that is when I really met the industrial worker as we understand him.

We were facing an imperialist organisation, because it was part of the British Rubber industry - a tough nut to crack. But the workers were very militant. In fact, their militancy was shown in the stayaway of 1950, when there was a complete stoppage of work at the Howick rubber factory. That was before they had a union.

So, the union was a follow-up of that... that is the trade union where I became deeply involved. Not that I wasn't deeply involved in other trade unions, but they were commercial workers, unlike industrial workers.

Now, I was listed then, first in 1950, then in the following year I was banned from the activities of the Rubber Workers Union and other trade unions - they mentioned them in the banning list. So I couldn't associate with those workers. I continued, and I was charged. But the case couldn't get a conviction.

Then they amended the banning order. I couldn't carry on. I organised the Municipal Workers Union. But the economic position was bad, so Mabhida took over and I went to work at Edendale Hospital as typist in a laboratory. That was in 1954.

I was there for 4 years. I was an organiser for "Pound a Day" - I was busy there in hospital. At one stage we organised a doctors strike. We had some good doctors there. I mention no names, because some of them are still active.

Then they dismissed me - it was in May (inaudible word). They dismissed me there for organising workers. I had a hand in organising the doctors strike. Though they didn't say so to me, it was that. There was no more work for me.

When I left that place, I did cartage work for a short while. Then again, I got started with the trade unions. Rubber workers again - the banning order had expired. It was two years - it expired They renewed it for another two years. It expired round about June 1956.

When I went back to Howick, I was going there because the banning order had expired. They charged me in 1961. I was acquitted in the Supreme Court in 1962. So, by this time Mabhida was already in Durban. (word inaudible). He was working for a co-operative here in Pietermaritzburg for a long time when he left school.

There was a white comrade who ended up a school teacher in the Transvaal - perhaps it might prejudice him to know that he was a Party member, but he was in the Party, and he had organised that co-operative society, and he found employment for Moses there.

Moses worked there - he left school in 1942 - he worked there until he left the place to do full-time trade union work in the early SOs. By 1956, he had moved to Durban to organise the Railway Workers Union.

TK: Is that SARH U?

HG: Yes, yes.

TK: While you're talking about people, could you tell us a bit about Dan Tloome?

HG: I didn't know Dan very well. I first met him in Johannesburg. I didn't know what he was doing there. He was in the DPC - the Party committee in the early 40s. I met him again in Cape Town Party Conferences. A quiet somebody. If I am not mistaken, I think he was a former school-teacher, but I'm not very certain of that. Other than that I didn't... Dan was more of a (how shall we call it)... a chamber man, rather than somebody who was occupying platforms and the like.

HG: I don't know, I don't remember meeting Dan then. But when there was that break between those who stood for the South African Trades and Labour Council and continued the tradition, and those who reneged, I couldn't attend the meeting because of the banning order. The banning order was renewed just at that time - it was not possible to attend.

TK Sometimes one hears, particularly from academics, a criticism of some of the traditions of SACTU, saying that when trade unions get too involved in politics it weakens them. And they say that's what happened to SACTU. How from your experience would you respond to that?

HG: It's not a practical question, it's only an academic question. Because the labour issue in South Africa is a political issue. You find workers - I'm talking about those days - you find workers looking for work: the pass becomes involved. You find workers going on strike - they use the pass to dismiss them, victimise them. In fact, it was this pass that made it difficult to sustain the... besides the brutality of the army - to sustain the mineworkers strike of 46.

What is the position of the worker who is in the factory there. Or in the commercial sector. He had got to travel a long distance home to go to the township. And under what conditions were those townships put there? Parliament. Act. Law. Politics. The 1933 Native Urban Areas Act was a political issue. The Reserves - what is the position of the reserves? It is all politics.

So that while the workers fight on the shop floor, they find that the thing doesn't end there. They've got at the same time to fight higher rents, to fight the rise of bus fares, train fares, and to fight against the harassment by the police in the streets and in the townships.

With the African worker you can't separate trade unionism and political life. It's just impossible. It's not perhaps like the white worker who can work there at the factory floor, and then go to his home which is his castle. The African worker has no castle.

TK You said you were acquitted in 1962.

HG: Yes.

HG: That was 2 years later on a different charge. This was contravening the Suppression of Communism Act in that I had participated in trade union work where I shouldn't have. The 1964 charge was participating in the activities of the African National Congress.

7K And what were they specifically charging you with?

HG: Sabotage. It was alleged that I recruited a person for military training.

7K And were you sent to the Island?

HG: I was sent to the Island for 8 years.

IX And can you tell us about life and the struggles on the Island in that period?

HG: In the 60s it was terrible. It was hell out there. Food was extremely bad. Clothing was bad. Bedding was bad. And the warders there were very brutal. That is where I developed asthma. You hardly had anything to wear in winter, and many of us walked barefoot.

The main job there was quarry work. It was terrible. You were exposed to the cold that was coming from the sea. The warder there in charge - Delport: we used to build shelters and he would destroy them, and he would say "I want to expose you to cold".

As a result there were many strikes there in the 60s, many. And many people were charged and convicted domestically - the magistrate didn't come. The magistrate - I don't remember how many cases he came for, but if he did, they were very few. They were mostly departmental cases.

The warders used to compete on who could send the biggest number to isolation, where you had meal stops - usually three meals. They would collect... there would be a team of workers - they would just go there to that team and collect tickets from all those people, and they would be sent to isolation. It was terrible.

It was hell in the 60s. But we were sustained by our political discussions. Then we had something to live for. So they couldn't destroy the spirit in us, because we had something to look forward to.

We used to conduct drama there. We would have plays and what not. We kept ourselves occupied. These plays and these dances we held in December would make life bearable. But more than anything else, it was our political perspective that kept us going.

TK' So you would have come out then in about 1972...

HG: I came out in June 72.

TK' And how did it feel to come out? What was the situation in the country?

HG: Bad, it was bad. There was hardly any political movement. The only movement that was there was Black Consciousness - it had its sickening politics. You know, politics is racism, sickens. Now we had come from a place where we had two organisations - it was the ANC and the PAC. The PAC had its racist politics, but racism had no place in the ANC's politics.

So when I came out of prison, and I met this racism - but here they were calling it 'black', not 'African'. Calling it 'black': "black man you are alone", black man this, black man that... their literature was sickening. It was only when the workers started rising in 1973, in those Natal strikes, that something started to shape up.

TK' And then you were accused again in 1978?

HG: 75. I was picked up in 1975, right here, on a Sunday like this one. I was picked up, and went for a long time. On November 13, 1975, we appeared before court. In May of 76, ten of us, (words inaudible), both of them are still on the Island. Only one person was acquitted - William Khanyile. He was killed in that raid they had in Maputo. Khanyile was my cousin.

TK' What were you found guilty of in that trial?

HG: Terrorism Act. Recruiting for military training.

TK' And did you find the Island was different?

HG: It was quite different. That harassment was gone. Conditions were more or less relatively improved. They started introducing beds and that for. There was a little improvement in the diet. Relations with the authorities were eased. It wasn't what we saw in the 60s.

Prison was still prison. Yes.

TK' And your wife died in that time...

HG: My wife died in 1984.

TK: It must have been quite different coming out from the Island now...

HG: This is a different South Africa. You know, when I was released in June 1972, my wife, my sister, my brother-in-law, my son and my youngest daughter were there to meet me. I was picked up by the Special Branch which was in a hurry to give me a banning order. We were a lonely group there in the Special Branch car. I came here. Mark you, they knew the date of my coming out, but who were here? Only my relatives and my neighbours.

It was quite forlorn you know, extremely lonely. But this time, I didn't know I was going to be released until that morning of my... that morning when I was going to be released at 6 o'clock. They told me that I was going to be released at 6 o'clock. Then they called my daughter. Lulu came around with my son, Mandla, to meet me at Westville Prison, where, in comparison to Maritzburg prison which is terrible, conditions were not bad at all at Westville Prison.

Relations between myself and the authorities there were very normal. They used to attend to one's complaints and requests. It was terrible in Pietermaritzburg.

And then, they drove me to this place, to my home. But then the Special Branch wouldn't be left out. The Special Branch from Maritzburg came specially, for what I don't know. They also drove back with me in their own car. My son was with them, because there wasn't enough space with those (word inaudible) and myself.

Then when we arrived here... Aikona! Right from the gate they had spread mats and a huge crowd, singing and what not. Yes, and a big force of reporters and photographers. It was a different thing altogether.

From that time, crowds were just coming around, from Durban, and local crowds were coming to do a bit of singing here. Things have subsided down a bit now, but a lot of enthusiasm. There was a welcome come-together for us at the Lay Centre here, the Ecumenical Centre. And after that - it was organised by the clergy, the local clergy - after that one was taken all the way by a crowd that kept increasing in numbers, from that Centre right home.

Its a different South Africa.

HG: I think the ruling class has done everything to suppress the revolution which is taking place in the country. There are three things that you do - you threaten people with dismissal. When that fails you threaten them with arrest. When that fails, you start shooting them. That is the last resort. Beyond that, what else can you do?

People have passed a point of no return. They lose their jobs, there are still stay-aways. They are removed from their homes; they are banned and restricted. They are detained, and others are charged and convicted. And people are killed. You find the killings that are done by Inkatha now - in Cape Town it was the Witdoeke; in Johannesburg it was the 'Russians', the vigilantes and what not; Eastern Transvaal it was Imbokhoto; Northern Transvaal vigilantes; in Natal now it is Inkatha.

But there's no way of stopping people. In fact, these killings have had the opposite effect of mobilising people against oppression.

I think they have passed the point of return. But one cannot say that this evening we shall be free. But when people become conscious of what they want, and are prepared to fight for it, those people are free, because what is freedom, if not as Engels says "the realisation of necessity". People know now what they want. They know who their leaders are.

I see the imperialists and some forces are trying to resurrect the PAC. And yet, you go anywhere, you don't here... And many people don't know what that animal is - they've never heard of it. PAC, they ask you, what is that? They only sing songs about ANC, about Mandela, about Tambo, about Joe Slovo.

I thought the late 50s, 1959 in particular, we had reached our highest mark. But it is dwarfed by what has happened today. We thought we were very popular then, but if you are going to compare 59 with what is happening today, and with the name of the ANC, that was a pygmy compared to this big giant we see now.

But people don't get their freedom merely because they want to die for it, and merely because they are prepared to suffer. They still need to be organised properly, and have a proper direction. It's not enough just to sing about these leaders, about the ANC - the important thing is to organise people properly, know how to go forward, know how to go back if needs must be. Know when to advance and give a big push.

1. Edgar Brookes, noted South African liberal of the 1940s and 50s.
2. *The Guardian*, pro-Communist Party leftwing newspaper started in 1936/7. Later became the *New Age*.
3. The Non-European United Front, launched in 1938 to oppose segregation. The NEUF brought the CP together with a range of different organisations,

and served as a major platform for agitation against the war before 1941, and for black political rights.

4. Moses Mabhida later succeeded Moses Kotane as Secretary General of the SACP.

5. Ruth First, former ANC and SACP leader assassinated in Maputo in 1982.