

Recording made by Hilda Bernstein, 13th March 1973, on her recollections of the South African Peace Movement.

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I think there were two very important reasons why we started a Peace Movement - at least I was involved with these two reasons -. The first was a desire to do something about the menacing world situation since the dropping of the nuclear bombs in Japan, to outlaw nuclear weapons and to save the world from this terrible <sup>potential</sup> disaster it was facing; and the second was the desire to link up any activities on this front in South Africa with some sort of international movement, particularly in South Africa because one is so terribly isolated there from world affairs. This was in the early 1950's, a kind of post-war activity which grew up: people who took an active part in politics in South Africa also of course followed what was happening overseas, international affairs as we called it, but a lot of South Africans are very much absorbed with their own problems which are real and near, and everything else seems so far away and nobody cares a damn about it.

We felt a necessity to establish this international link. Now during the whole time of its existence the official peace movement in South Africa wasn't officially connected with the World Peace Council, but this was for safety reasons as far as the South African Government was concerned. But unofficially we kept our links with them, and wherever we could we sent people to conferences that were held. Sometimes we managed to send someone from South Africa very quietly, but very often there were South Africans abroad whom we asked to represent us at the conference. In one case, which Mr. Szur mentions, Phyllis Altman went to a conference - she is a South African writer who is living in London now and a Trade Unionist - and on another occasion Szur, Cecil Williams and I think Bram Fischer attended a conference, though I can't quite remember where it was. Bram Fisher was also active in the Peace Council. And I can't remember all the names of all the people who worked with us, but I do remember the beginning of the movement.

The Peace Council was formed with the support, in fact at the instigation of the National Liberation Movement. In South Africa there would have been no peace movement if we hadn't from the very first associated ourselves with



the struggle for liberation; in fact the pioneers of the movement were also people who were prominent in the National Liberation Movement. At the same time, as Mr. Szur correctly says, there were difficulties in the way of the peace movement becoming a mass movement in South Africa. Now he mentions some of the difficulties which I think are correct, but also one of them was the confusion that exists in the minds of people who are new to organisations and urban ideas, a confusion of organisations; and if we went to the townships and held meetings and told people 'you must join and become a member of the Peace Movement' while the Trade Union Movement was telling them why they had to be in Trade Unions, and the African National Congress doing the same thing - all of which were legal at this time - and the Communist Party in addition until it was banned, telling them why they must become members of the Communist Party, it does require somebody with a fair degree of political sophistication to sort out all these organisations. Because, in the end, if you look at it in a long-term way, the objectives are more or less the same: justice, peace, freedom, in broad terms. So it was necessary for us not to add to this confusion, and we did confuse people when we started trying to form peace branches in the townships. Finally, we realised the way in which to work, and we worked through the National Liberation Movement: when we had issues concerned with the question of peace, perhaps signatures we wanted to collect for a petition or perhaps some particular thing around which we wanted to get support, or anything of that nature, we would say to the African National Congress 'You're having a meeting here or there and we want a speaker on this subject. Either we would have our own Peace Council speaker or else one of their speakers would devote a portion of what he had to say to the peace question.

In that way, as you can see, the national liberation struggle and the peace movement are integrally absolutely linked together, right from the word go. Of course we had differences, right from the formation of the peace movement, within the peace movement itself on this question of how closely one linked with the national liberation struggle; the way I have spoken about it one might think, ipso facto, that it happened like that, but we had members of the Peace Council who felt from the beginning that we should appeal more to Whites. Now it isn't said in so many words but the Whites have the votes in



South Africa, the Whites hold the power, the press and control everything. If you want to become an organisation that is known, you must establish yourself with a certain kind of respectability among white people. This was the sort of feeling that ran through their reasoning; and that it's the Whites who are going to influence these issues and after all the Blacks aren't really so concerned with these questions of world peace and international matters and so on. As a result - and I don't now remember the forms it took - we did have constant fights with this particular faction within the peace movement, and ultimately a group of them left our Peace Council and had their own organisation, which didn't worry us because it wasn't in competition with us, but it actually faded out. This was the political struggle we did have, and being so closely associated with the National Liberation Movement meant that we could not appeal to the well-known and respected figures, which I may say at that time the World Peace Council was very anxious to have relations with. And when the WPC were having a conference or some big world affair, and they wrote to us and asked us to obtain South African sponsors, it was difficult for us to get these kind of names. We could get people like Chief Lutuli, as we did, and people of his calibre in the National Liberation Movement, but it was not easy for us to obtain the sponsorship of liberal, South African Whites who associated us entirely with the sort of radical section of the movement. So this was a problem then.

Then, of course, the other main difficulty with which we had to contend, and Mr. Szur has mentioned this, several times, is the fact that all such organisations as ours were regarded by the National Government of South Africa as being subversive; and in fact whether or not we had associated with the National Liberation Movement from the beginning in the way that we did, whether or not we had retained an air of respectability, in the end would have made no difference, because it was our aims which were contrary to those of the Government, and therefore they would have picked on people who were leading figures in the peace movement regardless of who they were.

Now our Peace Movement started off as a sort of regional organisation, and of course in all countries there are immense regional differences, but in our country the differences are increased by the enormous distances, and the different provinces are very much on their own: they organise very often



in their own particular way; where they can they've linked up nationally but very often ~~the organisations~~ in the Trade Union movement, in the Peace Movement and in the National Liberation and political struggle, organisation has taken different forms in the different provinces. We started off by organising a Transvaal Peace Council, and there was a Peace Council in the Cape, and later on there was also a Natal Peace Council. As far as I remember we never did establish anything in the Orange Free State although we had some supporters living there. As far as the Natal Peace Council is concerned M.P. Naicker, who is the Editor of *Seecha ba* and who works at the A.N.C. office, and he would be able to give information about the Natal Peace Movement, and then of course Sonia Bunting is familiar with the Cape Town situation, and finally - I think it was in 1953 - we decided to establish a National Peace Movement, at least to have a National Co-ordinating Council although of course we'd always already kept in touch; and we held a conference in Johannesburg which was one of the best conferences I have attended. We had represented there a really very broad spectrum of organisations and people, some of them very strange indeed, religious people rather way-out, and I don't know how long many of them would have stuck to us in any case, but we did have them there. We had a very good platform, with a Professor Gilman who is a research professor at Witwatersrand University - the other names I don't remember but they will be preserved in our files, and at that time I had been Secretary of the Transvaal Peace Council, and I was made Secretary of the new South African Peace Council, and I kept on saying 'for heaven's sake find somebody else because I will not last, the police were at this time getting very active in banning people from organisations, and I knew my life was limited. What in fact they did, just before this conference, they banned Bram Fisher who was supposed to be making the opening address, and Dan Cluny, who is a leading member of the African National Congress. He was also very active in the peace movement during most of its life in South Africa, a very fine man. Both of these men were banned, but Bram's opening address was recorded, as far as I remember, and we played some of it at the Conference but he was unable to attend himself. I and one or two others managed to avoid getting banned: I think they were looking for us



just before the Conference but we kept out of the way, and we had one meeting directly after the Conference and a couple of days after that - when the police were looking for me - I was banned. I was prohibited from the Peace Council and all other organisations and all gatherings. Under the Suppression of Communism Act, under which one receives the bans, which incidentally of course apply to all kinds of people who have nothing to do with Communism or the Communist Party at any time, a gathering is defined as two or more people who have come together for a common purpose. This means that literally you cannot attend any public meeting or function of any kind; in fact if you observe the Act you can never do anything at all even in your own home; but it's a question of to what extent you contravene what the police consider to be aspects of the Act because there are many aspects which are never tried out until they are brought to the Court, and then the definition of the Act is defined by the decisions of the Courts, on the interpretation of what it was. Generally we knew that the interpretation was political meetings of any kind were out, and it was from that time - and I of course was not the only one who was banned in that way - that the bans became extended, and anyone who was active was banned. Finally we had as our Secretary the pseudonym B. Smith, and whoever was Secretary the letters were signed B. Smith. B. Smith didn't exist as a person, B. Smith was a lot of different people at different times, and that was the only way in which we could keep a Secretary from being sought out and banned by the police!

From this time onwards, the time that we formed the National Peace Council, and at a time when our activities were expanding and at a time when our work was beginning to be felt among people, from that time onwards we began to function in a semi-legal fashion. We had an office at one time where we held meetings which we arranged quite openly, but we had gradually to arrange our meetings more secretly, not using the telephone and so on, and then meetings to which banned people like myself and others used to come privately. Well, we continued to function right up to the end in this kind of way and the police knew that banned people were attending meetings, but sometimes it suited their purpose not to arrest or take action and sometimes they were simply biding their time. Sometimes of course it was a question of proving, which is not always a very easy thing to do. For instance you could arrest somebody for being at a



gathering, but unless you actually got them there with witnesses at the time, it was difficult, and usually when we held meetings we had sort of escape routes in case we should be interrupted: somebody would go out this way and somebody else would go out that way and so on. So it wasn't a simple, straight-forward matter for them to get us, but there were a number of people who were not banned until the very end - Mr. Szur was one of them - most of the people were picked off bit by bit and therefore in the end our activities as a Council became clandestine although the image was a public one, and it was very difficult.

To go back to this question of the relationship of the Peace Movement with the National Liberation Movement, we always had representatives of the African National Congress on our Peace Committee, our Peace Council; among them this man Dan Cluny, Yussuf Dadoo and Lilian Ngoyi, who was prominent both in the A.N.C. and the Women's Federation. And I remember very strongly indeed what Lilian said to me once: we finally arranged through the Women's Federation for Lilian and another African woman to go overseas and attend an International Women's Conference, which they did; and while they were in Europe they were taken to Dachau and they were shown the concentration camp and were told something about it, the lampshades made from human skin and so on. And Lilian Ngoyi came back and said this to me: "You know, I was in the Peace Council without understanding what it was about; I was in it because our organisation supported it and I knew it had to be right and so on, but I used to think what's this woman going on and on about peace" - she was referring to me - "how can I have peace in my heart when I have war in my stomach?" And this was Lilian's beautiful way of explaining how Africans felt about such things; she was well-known in the Women's Federation and in the A.N.C., and then of course she was banned. For the last eleven years I understand that her bans have not been renewed and she's able to function a little more freely, she can come out of her one township and so on, but she was a very vigorous and down-to-earth woman and this phrase stuck in my mind - 'how can there be peace in my heart when there is war in my stomach.' When she saw Dachau she said she understood what we meant, and she became one of the people one relied on in the National Liberation Movement and the Peace Movement.



Now as far as our activities were concerned Mr. Szur has covered quite a wide range. I'd forgotten, but he's reminded me of these cultural functions that we held which were very important and very interesting. We did manage to get out our "Peace News" fairly regularly off and on over long periods sometimes, and circularised it to all sorts of people, and we supported the International Conferences, we got sponsors where it was possible, we got people giving statements of support where it was not possible to do anything else and things of this nature, and of course when there were world petitions as there were at the beginning against nuclear weapons we collected signatures. I just wanted to add a footnote to this collection of signatures referred to by Mr. Szur: I remember this was before the formation of the National Peace Council, when we were still a Transvaal Peace Council, a mine-worker sent up to our office sheet after sheet of signatures which he collected on the mines in support of the ban on nuclear weapons and for the Stockholm Appeal.

However, this business of collecting signatures for an Appeal becomes a dangerous thing in a country like South Africa: no matter what you do to safeguard them you've got great lists of people who've signed these Appeals and sooner or later there's a raid on the office and those lists are gone and all the names are taken and put on the police files. And this is not a very good thing; you can say All right, we'll use them and then destroy them, but it doesn't always happen that way, you don't know when a raid is going to take place; and of course people don't want any more to put their signatures to appeals when they're afraid of them going on police files. So there are methods of activity which are legitimate in other countries which are difficult to use in South Africa.

There's a point I want to emphasize and that is the importance of the Peace Movement in South Africa to the World Peace Council and the importance of the World Council to the Peace Movement. As far as we were concerned in South Africa, having an international base is a terribly important thing, it's a matter of having an international platform, and it was through organisations such as the World Peace Council which provided such a platform to the people of South Africa that the problems of South Africa became more and more recognised throughout the world. When our delegates went to World



Council Meetings they spoke about the persecution in South Africa. Of course they linked it to the struggle for peace generally and explained why it was important, an important part of it, but it was a platform to the world which was provided and it was very important to South Africa to have such a platform. And as far as the World Peace Movement was concerned, I think that our Peace Movement, with others of course, played an important part in bringing a recognition of why the National Liberation struggle is an integral part of the world struggle for peace. And of course, I have to say this, we were not pacifists: you can struggle for peace and yet not be pacifists. The idea of pacifism is very much, I think, part of the Western world; for people who live in what are colonial or with a colonial background, or in South Africa which has a type of colonialism of its own, the whole idea of pacifism is laughable, because the question of non-violence doesn't arise, violence is an absolute part of your life, you never think in these terms of should I or should I not be non-violent. The strange thing is that in South Africa the influence of Gandhi who started his non-violent movement there is very strong, in spite of all this. So that it was that the violence always came from the other side. But the intellectual concept of pacifism as a sort of world movement doesn't really arise in the same way. I think it was important for the World Peace Council to accept more and more how important the National Liberation struggle was for us and the maintenance of world peace and that there couldn't be any real stability in the world until there was freedom in all these areas of the world. And that was one of the purposes which we served.

Now of course the decline of the Peace Movement in South Africa, or rather the step-up of persecution occurred: leading figures in the Peace Movement were not just peaceniks, they were also A.N.C. people and members of the Congress of Democrats and other organisations of the T.U. Movement and so on, and it was for all their activities, peace activities included, that they would get banned usually, and once banned, although one could go on functioning in a clandestine way, it became more and more difficult and then of course more and more people were arrested. One tried not to break bans openly because this was just inviting trouble, but sooner or



later bans were broken and the police would come down on one. So our forces were dispersed and disintegrated and the Peace Movement, with some other organisations in South Africa, was never actually made illegal, it was never outlawed - it wasn't necessary to do so. All they did was to make illegal all the activities of the people concerned with it, so that there was no one left to function, and even if someone did come up under the name of B. Smith, sooner or later he was uncovered, and so it wasn't possible to carry on. But while there were still a couple of people left associated with the peace movement in South Africa, the activities did continue and our international links remained. Finally there was Mr. Szur and myself meeting together, with perhaps sometimes one or two people we managed to rake in who would do a little bit of typing for us; Mr. Szur was the driving force, not I; by that time I was too involved in other things and it was really very difficult to carry on with the peace movement, but he was, as it were, the rock of stability who kept the thing going and insisted that we should get out our News Letter when we could, which we did, and write to the World Peace Council, which we also did. We posted our News Letter from different letter boxes in different places addressed in different handwritings.

Finally, I left South Africa in 1964; by that time Valerie Phillips had gone and nearly everybody else had gone or else they were over the border or in gaol, and Mr. Szur was left by himself, until a couple of years later he also left. And that was the end of the official peace movement in South Africa. However, we continued to represent the people in South Africa on peace organisations outside the country in the same way that the African National Congress had to move its headquarters out of South Africa. It is a peace movement in exile, it no longer has an organisation or mass basis in the country, and our association is through the African National Congress: those of us who were concerned with the peace movement are members, outside South Africa, of the African National Congress. The African National Congress is officially represented and has four members of the World Peace Council and a member of the Presidium and takes an active part in world peace affairs in ~~the continuing~~ this way, so the continuing struggle goes on. Therefore there has been continuing movement right from the times that the Peace Movement was formed and we do feel ourselves to be a part of the World



Peace Movement, and I think, as I have already said, that for both of us, both for the World Peace Movement and the South African Peace Movement, it was important to have us in South Africa - South Africans for Peace - and also from the point of view of the South Africans, it was important for us to have a World Peace Movement with whom we had connections internationally.

Tape Ends.



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