

Matthews Mojapelo

LRC Oral History Project

18 July 2008

Int This is an interview with Advocate Matthews Mojapelo and it's in Pretoria and the 18th of July (2008) and I should I refer to you as Matthew or Matthews?

MM Matthews with an S

Int Yes, I realise that. Matthews thank you very much for agreeing to be part of the LRC Oral History Project, we really appreciate it on behalf of SALS Foundation in Washington, D.C. I wonder whether we could talk about, we could start off the interview by you talking about your early childhood memories, what was it like growing up in South Africa under apartheid and what were some of your early childhood memories and what do you think led to your sense of social justice and injustice, where did that develop?

MM I grew up in the rural areas .I was born in the urban areas, my mother stayed in the urban areas, but I was sent to the rural areas, because schooling was not disrupted that side because of the social unrest, due to the protest against apartheid at that time. The rural areas were just like, you can say they were just naïve, you didn't get a lot of information, we were just doing the schooling. There were no disruptions but during the holidays I would go to my home...

Int To the urban areas, to see your mum?

MM In the urban areas, yes.

Int Sorry, Matthews, when you say rural and urban areas, which part of South Africa were you born in and where did you grow up?

MM Okay, it is now called Limpopo, the province is now called Limpopo, it is in the northern part and the biggest city there is Polokwane now. It used to be Pietersburg. That area is part of the poorest part of South Africa, it is got a lot of rural areas, where you go and fetch wood in the bushes, water in the river, very far.

Int So, currently it is the same situation?

MM Yes, in the rural areas, it is still the same situation. It has proved with electricity but during that time, it is not long ago, it didn't, it was a revelation to go to the urban areas to see lights.

Int In terms of the period you were growing up in, what was the political situation with the Pass Laws still enforced, how is that Mum was living in the urban areas?

MM Okay, when I saw the urban areas, it was just, it was not in town, it was not in town. It is in a township. It is called a township (inaudible). My mother then, they were...

Interrupted by telephone call. The interview is delayed for a considerable time (more than 2 hours) and resumes thereafter...

Int So, you were telling me that it was a township rather than an urban area.

MM What happened was that our parents were staying in town, like you know, like on the other side of town, but close to town, where they could walk to town. But you know in South Africa, there were things called forced removals, so they were removed from town to a place designated for black people. So it is a township, so that's what I mean by urban areas.

Int When you were growing up, did you have memories of your parents being forcibly removed?

MM No, I know nothing about it because I was born in 1973 and they were removed in 1972, just a year before I was born, yes.

Int Right and did your family talk about what was going on and that black people were treated differently from white people, or did you just experience that by yourself?

MM I would say that I experienced that by myself at school or outside, it was never an intensive talk about apartheid in the house. It was like my, I mean I grew up with my granny, it was just the way of like, that was the only life they knew, the complaints you would get from school, from teachers, teachers are youngsters, they told us what's happening.

Int In terms of going to school, you were born in 1973, so by the time, you were in school, the 1980s had rolled around, and things were intense in the country, I wondered whether you could talk about that, did you get involved in student movements or did you stay out of it?

MM You see, as I have said, I grew up; I spent a lot of time in the rural areas, where the activities were not that much. The news, we were not that close to the news. You will see it there and there and the, late, late, very late in my student life, just before I went to varsity, that's when I went to a high school, that I can say, where you are in the thick of things. I mean, I told my school mates, it was a joke, you know I had never had the smell of a tear gas, I wanted to experience that, but it was very late when I experienced that.

Int It must have been quite a shock for you, culture shock almost, because you grew up in relatively peaceful surroundings, with your grandmother, who I am sure you were close to and then you go the urban school, what was that experience like for you?

MM Cultural, I can say it was a cultural shock because I am sort of like a reserved person and I had to adopt, but it was not like I was not aware of what was happening, because I know the reason for me being in the rural areas, was to hide me from, from the rush of the protest. It was very scary, you know, to be chased by police in vans, pointing a gun at you; it was very, very scary. I still remember my first experience, when we had, it was March, and the police were there. I can't remember the issues, but I remember the runnings. There was one time, you will feel alone, you felt alone, I was sprinting, I was on my top speed and I felt that there was no one else between me and the police van and the police gun and I was forced to run in the street line because the corner was very far. You know, the reaction that I can remember, was that I think I closed my eyes and threw my hands in the air, just waiting to feel a bullet or a wheel of a car hitting me, until I got to the corner and turned. It took ages to get to the corner.

Int How old were you?

MM At that time, I think I was around, around 16 to 18, 16-18. But then it became a way of life, I mean, I started becoming part of the real South Africa now.

Int In what way?

MM In what way, in a sense, I understood what was happening, I was just far from the action because of my rural areas. I already had my political ideas, I knew and I had, I knew which, which, which side to take.

Int Where do you think that developed, how did that develop, because in some ways, you say that you were sent to the rural areas, in a way, you think of it, as protection, but where do you think, how old were you, at what point did things start developing for you in terms of social justice and injustice?

MM You see, as I say, during the holidays, we used to go to the urban areas, there is a famous editor now, I think he is world famous, He is now an editor in Johannesburg city, editor of the Sunday papers. When he was junior journalist, he was staying at **inaudible**, that's the urban home.

Int What is he called?

MM His name is Mathatha Tsedu

Int When he was still a junior working for a daily newspaper in Soweto, he was staying there, he had a house there, he was living with all of us, so, in September, you know, September is the month where Stephen Bantu Biko was killed, and I know he was a very, very big supporter of one of the political organizations, AZAPO, I am talking about the editor. He used to call us into his house and show us video shows, just videos, banned videos. Some of them, are actually movies, you know, the Cry Freedoms, some banned videos of, of the history of the struggle, where are we, were do we want to go to. Then, at that time, I think around, fifteen, when I am fifteen, sixteen, when I used to come during the holidays, then I started learning and knowing, but then the rural areas, wouldn't go and say, you know, this is what we think, this is what the country is suffering, this is what must be done. At what where I grew up, it wasn't really an issue. I mean people were just naïve. I mean, police were not even coming to arrest people for political reasons, because we just naïve. We were the real, real products of what the apartheid system wanted us to be.

Int I am also wondering you had these holidays and these were really like influential in terms of understanding what was going on but then you went off to the rural area, did you find that in some ways, you asked yourself the question of why it is you were living in the rural areas, and why it is your parents, your mother was living in the urban areas? Did you ask your mother or was it something you just accepted?

MM You see in my situation, I know it was, it was because they wanted me to go to a peaceful school. People in the urban areas were going to school, but they were always running. But if you know the history of South Africa, its usual for parents to be away from children. Its usual because mostly it is because of work. People go and work in the urban areas, very far or work in the mines and come home once a year. So, I was one of them. It wasn't surprising.

Int It wasn't different?

MM Yes, almost all of those people had parents working very far.

Int So you mentioned also that by the time you were 16-18, you had this encounter with the police, which was quite harrowing. I am wondering after that, at what point, did you finish your schooling, or what happened to you after that?

MM Okay, it was during my senior, I can say, senior high school, when I finished senior high school, my last year in senior high school. It was just a turning point. Remember that is when Mandela was released. It was just a turning point. We were just, I wouldn't say I was active in politics, I wasn't a leader, but I was there, when action need to be done, I was there. But in 1990, when everything started, there was a lot of confusion, just a lot of confusion to most of people, who didn't know what was going to happen. They are just excited. And it was a transition in my life that I was going now to university.

Int So, which school, high school did you go to?

MM High school is **inaudible**

Int That was in Pietersburg?

MM Yes.

Int And from there, which university did you go to?

MM I went to the University of the North, it is now called University of Limpopo, also in the North.

Int Did you study immediately for a law degree?

MM Yes, I studied immediately for a law degree.

Int Can you tell me just to take you a bit back...where do you think this desire to study law came from, was it early on was it just something you could study at university, did you have a sense that you wanted to be a lawyer?

MM I always wanted to be a technical person. I always wanted to be an engineer and or an optometrist, you know, I always wanted to do things, but I firstly, in medicine, I am very, very afraid of opening wounds and blood, you know, and that never, I knew that if I was going to do it, I would get proper psychological trainings but I was afraid of doing that. Then the engineering, in that part, although I lost interest but I don't think I really got an opportunity to go and explore it. I really didn't get an opportunity to explore it, I don't know what are the reasons but it is always, the struggle in South Africa has always been a struggle of opportunities. I remember my best friend in high school. At high school we had about five senior classes, and the pass rate wasn't that good, it was very low, I think it was less than ten percent and less than six percent of us got to go to a tertiary institution. So I think only one in that class, managed to do engineering studies. Law has always been my second choice, cos I always wanted to be a lawyer, although even when I studied law, I didn't really, really know that I am going to end up with an interest in human right. When I studied law, I thought I was going to do fancy stuff, like entertainment law, all those things. Law was my second choice. Then, when it came January, for registration to go to varsity, it took my week, it took a lot of talking between me and my mother and I finally made a decision that I am going to study law, I am going to be a lawyer.

Int What did your mother think?

MM My mother supported each and every decision that I wanted. My mother wanted just to have a child who is a university graduate.

- Int What do you attribute your succeeding to, particularly in a situation where only six percent of high schools in your group, in your cohort actually ended up at university?
- MM You see, the standard of education at that time, was extremely inferior. I don't know about now, but it was very, very inferior. That was really, really inferior.
- Int So, you got to university, did you do a BProc or an LLB?
- MM I did a BPROC and thereafter I did an LLB.
- Int And you studied at the University of the North?
- MM I did the BPROC at the University of the North and an LLB, I did it here in Gauteng, it used to be called Vista, it is now part of University of Pretoria.
- Int So, you really became a lawyer in the post-apartheid era, why go after that, instead of doing Articles in a corporate firm why go to the Legal Resources Centre? How did you get there?
- MM Okay, (laughter). Honestly, how I got there, I was just looking for a job. I was just looking for a job. If you know the history of South Africa, there are very few corporate law firms and I was definitely not of the right colour to go and work for these big firms. But I looked for a job everywhere. It was easy for me to go to the LRC, because immediately after university I worked there informally, as a law advisor dealing strictly with labour cases. You know, with labour cases, people that you meet are your blue collar workers who are not sophisticated and they are facing sophisticated employers in forums in court. That's where I started, as a labour law consultant. I worked there for about six months, before I joined the Legal Resources Centre, so it was, I knew about the Legal Resources Centre, okay, I knew about it while I was still at school, I knew about it because of one, George Bizos, who everyone who was locked up, got a human rights lawyers, looked up to. So, when you looked up his achievement, his history, you know this organization called the Legal Resources Centre. And coincidentally, my former Dean of Law, at the University of the North, was at that time the Director, that is Professor (Bongani) Majola.
- Int What is his first name?
- MM Bongani Majola.
- Int Oh right, of course. Right. So, he had gone to the LRC as a National Director.
- MM Yes, he had gone there as a Director. So then I knew about the LRC for some time. I knew almost everything. I wanted to see my name on day on the Annual Report. So the interview was extremely easy for me.

Int So, you started there in 1999?

MM Yes, I started there as a Candidate Attorney in 1999, signed a two year contract. I was working, I was rotating between four lawyers. As I remember, you spent six months with one lawyer, another six months with another lawyer.

Int I am going to stop at this point, because I think you have to go...

MM Ja, let me go and check.

This interview was unable to be completed due to the interviewee's prior engagement...

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