

Edited Interview Transcript of Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, 23 January 2003

MEWA: I had to address a meeting at Wits, it was organised by the University Christian Movement. I was supposed to meet the UCM at the home of a journalist Margaret Smith, she was a friend of my then.

IAIN: This is late 60s.

MEWA: No in 1971, March/April this was the second meeting that I had of the Campaign for Clemency outside of Durban. The first one was in Cape Town and the next one was at Wits. And I forget the person's name; a priest [INAUDIBLE] on his desk. He was Father Brown. And I was supposed to have addressed this meeting. Present at the meeting was Father Brown, myself, Margaret Smith, the chairperson of the UCM at Wits and two other people. That's all. Lawrence Schlemmer telephoned and left a message at Cosmos Desmond's house where I had afternoon tea. Cosmos Desmond himself was banned because of his book on Dimbaza. And he said to me after your meeting I will drive you home [INAUDIBLE] He was the treasurer for of the Campaign for Clemency.

IAIN: Lawrie?

MEWA: Laurence Schlemmer. But there was hardly any money there, he was the treasurer. And he called me for dinner that night. I had soup and toast and after soup and toast we drove in his car. What Margaret Smith had done in the meantime; she has taken a copy of my speech and telephoned Benjamin [Progrund] who was then the deputy editor of the Rand Daily Mail and said to him there is no need to send me over a journalist, I am here, I will cover it for you. At about 4/5 o'clock in the morning whilst we were passing Ladysmith, sometime then or at about 6 o'clock in the following morning because we left very late past midnight he woke me up and I was fast asleep in his car, leaned back and sleeping. He said would you like some coffee, I said yes let us stop for some coffee. He also brought a copy of the morning Rand Daily Mail with him. In the front page second third lead article was the previous day's meeting at Wits. This was his response, I got the front page of the Rand Daily Mail. I said well you should know because I am the chairperson [INAUDIBLE] you are the treasurer, you should be keeping tracks on all these. And he mentioned two things which were mind bending whilst we were driving back. It was his view that the African National Congress at its height had no more than 3 500 members and I said to Laurie have you ever heard that before on the forces that are opposed to the ANC in our country, perhaps you are reinforcing their view for whatever it means but since you are doing this research and your research fellows could you kindly tell me how many members at any one time had the Indian National

Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and the Nehru's and the likes, what was their membership, could you tell me. Could you tell me what is the paid up membership of the IFP? At stage I think he had begun to show signs of leanings. At that stage I myself was working with Dr Buthelezi because early in the year, it was the same year he launched the Gandhi work and then nothing intriguing episode that taking place already between Lawry and myself.

The first work cam that I had at Phoenix Settlement was conducted with the assistance of Lawrie Schlemmer, where he got university students because I had to bring down the wall which was built in front [] which was Gandhi's original home, because the original house did not have cemented wall in front of it. It was decided by Mrs Gandhi who was the resident trustee then of Phoenix Settlement and myself that this is an anomaly it has done injustice to the historical [INAUDIBLE] place. We decided to bring that front wall down. To Laurie Schlemmer's credit he helped us organise a group of students from the University of Natal, at that stage all of them were white students and that was very fascinating, without exception they were white students, 67, 68 sometime there.

And then I saw these people, I was banned, but saw them from a distance, I mean a distance of 5, 10 yards away using 14 pounds hammers and doing physical work, picking up the rubble in wheelbarrows.

IAIN: Probably the first time in their lives.

MEWA: I would like to think so, I think it was the first time in their lives in an organised way not in their garden, they used pick up some rubbish and pick it in one place or the other but in a systematic organised way, first time in my life I saw them digging top soil. Where the Gandhi Museum and Library stands today that was the place we used to kill snakes. It was from that area that we dug as a worker top soil and deliver them to on wheelbarrows, blistered hands to the front of Gandhi's original home.

Night after the day's work we could talk Gandhi, talk work, we could talk a [INAUDIBLE] we could talk over the dignity of labour. At night [INAUDIBLE] eat and slept whatever a couple of nights. That was my first interaction, interfacing with Laurie Schlemmer.

The next one, of course we met in between he became treasure, we have clemency but the moment he realised the kind of momentum that was getting we saw a residing of this kind of participation, but anything Laurie Schlemmer we had [] Alan Paton many of them [] they realised that we had diverse agendas and I can understand that, but when [Rick Tuner] came into the scene, Rick Tuner and Laurie Schlemmer they were close friends and because of my relationship with Rick Tuner this was further consolidated but what devastated and that devastation image has not left my mind as

yet. The morning after Rick Turner was assassinated somebody telephoned me to say Rick Turner has been assassinated. I said what do you mean by this, where, how, when, he said I have no details but I have just heard that Rick Turner was assassinated last night. So I said to myself the best person to find out from is Laurie Schlemmer because of their closeness to each other and I phoned him. He was so shit scared we didn't even talk about Rick Turner assassination. I by then was serving my third term of banning order and second term of house arrest. I was in Verulam, I have moved to Verulam then and that relative separation from Rick because of the distance was hurtful what was more hurtful was the speed with which people wanted to distance themselves from the memory of Rick Turner in 1977.

IAIN: Rick has a high principle philosophy as a builder as a manual labour.

MEWA: In 1970 the most fascinating visitor [INAUDIBLE] system knocked at my door this was the evening of the day on which the Mahatma Gandhi Library, Museum and Clinic were officially opened by Harry Oppenheimer and Anson Lloyd. I didn't know Rick Turner at all before that date. [I did understand that he was part of] and in 1970 to spend hours the people across racial lines not only sharing a platform but in the audience standing chick by jaw was a reinforcement for my own belief because the year before that we have succeeded with the Gandhi Centenary celebrations to do that but this was a culmination on the stage with people like Chief Gatsha Buthelezi, King Goodwill Zwelithini, Harry Oppenheimer, Anson Lloyd, Alan Paton, Mrs Gandhi.

IAIN: Rick Turner knocked at your door.

MEWA: No not at that stage, I could year that from the public address system, Alan Paton chairing the session I felt very fractured and very humbled to at the same time when he said and made a public acknowledgement that had it not been the determination, hard work and dedication of one person who remains banned, who remain banned we would not have come to this function, this celebration would not have been possible. [INAUDIBLE] did a hell of a lot of good to my ego being a young 38 years of age, it meant a lot more yes indeed one cannot denied that. But what was more fascinating [] and whilst the meeting was still carrying on I don't know what happened on the stage because I couldn't be there. Whilst the meeting was still carrying on I believe Mr Oppenheimer for whatever reason left the stage and as he left the stage and having left the stage he walked towards the house where I was standing and I believe by then he had known that it was me with whom he had dined a couple of hours before that and I dined with him as a banned person, breaking the law in my dining room and seating in the dining room with the captains of industry and commerce and agriculture. At one end of the table was Mrs Gandhi and at the other end was yours truly, and seating around us were Mr and Mrs Harry Oppenheimer [NAMES] and a group of people I think all in all we were 12 and by the way I was breaking the law. But when Harry Oppenheimer left the stage, he came up to embrace me and he quickly saw the media running behind him and he distanced himself away from me and just shook my hands and stood there for 30 seconds I guess at the

most the best 30 seconds made his point. He is a very bright man [] Harry Oppenheimer or Mr O he shook my hands, congratulated me and walked back.

Rick Turner perhaps was part of the [] I don't know.

IAIN: Harry Oppenheimer wanted to use the toilet.

MEWA: I don't know Harry Oppenheimer wanted to go to the toilet but he went back to the gathering.

MEWA: Paton [INAUDIBLE]

IAIN: Paton had come a week in advance to check on – you know he was the chairperson of the board of trustees so he has got a responsibility, as an organising secretary I also had the responsibilities too as like all secretaries [] of the [] of all institutions. So everybody knew that him as chairperson of trustees that Harry Oppenheimer was going to have lunch with us. Which meant to have lunch with us him coming there at about 11:30 which he did and then staying on after that going to the meeting which started at 14:30, 3 o'clock which he did and again the calls of nature can be [] different people and in fairness Paton must have wondered where was he going to the toilet even when he came or when he came here.

[He] was by then married to one called Anne who had her own [] and her own ways and mannerisms which I guess the best of Allan Paton's friends could not relate to at best. So both of them came up the Sunday before [] to inspect the toilets and I said to Alan Paton before he did that before you do that in Mrs Gandhi's presence, Ela my wife was at the stage was very highly pregnant I didn't want to upset her she was in the last stages of her pregnancy because our twin daughters we born just a few a week or two after the function, I didn't want to disturb her. I said very politely to Paton and Anne good people I would like you to know that this is my home and if those Oppenheimer's can come and eat in my home then they can shit in my home in the toilet that are provided. It is a very impolite language to use to an internationally renowned author, leader of the Liberal Party, the chairperson of the Phoenix Settlement Trust. In some people's eyes it is very indiscrete, impolite to use impolite language, but how polite is it coming from such a person the notion that I have to inspect the ablution toilet facilities provided by this person in his home, so and so [INAUDIBLE] of arrogance and height of [] and I couldn't take this courtesy and I could didn't and I still don't, I couldn't take this courtesy and the arrogance from the Nats and I was not going to take it my own [] he was my colleague.

IAIN: Did he back off or [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: No, no I don't know if he inspected the toilets thereafter, but I have made my point, but at the best of my knowledge he didn't.

IAIN: Rick Tuner remains there [INAUDIBLE]

MEWA: Rick Tuner in that context in that function told me later in the evening at about 9, 10 o'clock dark winter, cold, torn dirty clothes, he knocked at the door. I didn't open the door somebody must have[] him stood at the breakfast room, we don't know each other but I want to talk with you, he introduced himself [INAUDIBLE] and I asked him do you know what you are doing? He said yes. Are you the Dr Rick Tuner from the University of Natal? Yes. Do you know where you are seating? Yes. With him was a young lady called [] I said if the security police walked in here now, you will be compelled to give evidence against me that I was in breach of the law by meeting you here. He said yes it might mean that but I would also mean that Harry Oppenheimer, Anson Lloyd, and Alan Paton will also have to give evidence against you because they had lunch with you this afternoon. Give me your [] I might just be tempted to give that kind evidence too. Now here was Rick Tuner at his heights, here was Rick Tuner was thinking miles away from the possibilities as to how he would handle the situation where he is going to give evidence. Now this is our first meeting, if I am compelled to give evidence I will ensure that Harry Oppenheimer, Allan Paton and Anson Lloyd also came along and give evidence to say that my meeting here was a continuation of that meeting. And I said to him when are they going to make you a professor? He said no there is no aspiration to that. We were getting into serious discussions, he told me that he was from [] he told me about his mother in Stellenbosch, his first marriage with children, because he saw my children there...