

Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, 3rd February, 2003

IAIN: Your movement into NUSAS. How did you as an Indian student get involved in this? What were your perceptions of NUSAS?

MEWA: Firstly, the dynamics of the late 50's and 60's as such, they are totally different. In the days when NUSAS was established there was no doubt of the fact that at the time it had an impact on student affairs, had an impact on race relations - as did the South African Institute of Race Relations - and they were respected for this. But the ethos that they were confronted with was in many ways different from the ethos that we were confronted with. The perspectives that they had, to the ethos that was prevalent then and the perspectives that we had were all relative to who was seeing what. What were the founders of NUSAS seeing? Was it the mobilization of English-speaking white students? I'd say yes. That was a motivation. Was it a question of liberalism with a capital L? I'd say yes, there is no doubt of the fact. Was it a challenge to the social system? I'd no. Was it a challenge to Afrikaner nationalism as manifested in a political organization called the Nationalist Party and the student bond and the Afrikaner Broederbond? I'd say yes. Was there a desire to resolve the intricate problems of race? Yes. Was there a resolution on the part of NUSAS to alter the social contradictions and the political manifestations in our country? I would say no.

In that context we are placed right in the middle of what was with then a uni-racial student body and of student politics. When NUSAS was established the University of Natal was there practicing apartheid. There was no law to say to the University of Natal had to have separate universities. There was no law in existence in Natal or anywhere else to say to us that white students and black students cannot study together or graduate together with the parents present in a common city hall or a common venue. There is nothing to prohibit non-racialism to exist. But the University of Natal practiced apartheid without being forced by law to do so. Now in those circumstances what were the responsibilities of people like ourselves, me included. Could we view education and student's isolation from the total contradictions in our country? We couldn't. It would be reflecting on our own integrity on the one hand and by our acceptance of that situation. We would give it justification. So the question arose, what do we do about it? So there are two approaches. One is a philosophical approach and the other one was a practical political approach. What would advance our cause on the basis of non-racialism? We couldn't talk racialism in isolation from a racial situation. We couldn't talk of non-racialism if we didn't accept the existence of racialism. We couldn't say that we want a non-racial, united, democratic society if we did intervene in those institutions wherever we were. So the task for us was in the spirit of building a non-racial united democratic South Africa NUSAS as a student institution afforded us a building block. We could at a university level - albeit that we came from different backgrounds and different social conditions. From the townships and the rural areas and whatever they were, separated as we were in

physical terms, minds also being ghettoed unconsciously in these ghettos. University would afford us the opportunity of breaking those ghettoed colonized minds - so to speak - ours that is. But it didn't mean that the minds of those opponents in NUSAS had not colonized themselves or that they are not ghettoed. They too were ghettoed. For in seeking to liberate ourselves we had to liberate them.

Now how did we do this? We couldn't just ignore their existence. We didn't have the resources and support of the Universities to give birth to a different non-racial student body. And for the first time in the history of NUSAS in my days was a Vice-President a black man from the Western Cape: Kenneth Parker. Now just to have him symbolically there was a step forward but we are not going to allow ourselves to be subjected to symbolism. We wanted the core, the inner core of that institution changed. Amongst others I also became a Director of Studies and I was directed by my motivations to become or to be willing to serving as a Director of Studies in NUSAS. I undertook a tremendous amount of responsibility on behalf of many people. Essentially it was a key position, and we pushed those positions that we had in mind. It was a bit different from what the traditional NUSAS leaders did. We, I, did not hesitate to link up, to consult with the leadership of the liberation movement outside. People like M D Naidoo, Rowley Arenstein, whoever was the leadership in Natal at that stage.

IAIN: Were you talking about link up with the liberation people outside of campus?

MEWA: Outside of the campus to consult with, to find out as to how we could gear student politics to be in tune with the politics of the liberation. And we were proven to be right. That it is important to be in NUSAS: the word is infiltration. We had a defined political objective. We wanted to reach out to the white community to say that your destiny is linked inextricably to the destiny of all oppressed peoples in this case, black people. Whether the destiny of the Indian community, or the coloured community or the white community. Not one of these so-called minority groups could ignore the vast majority of people who happen to be African. And therefore the re-definition of student politics had to be accomplished. Politically the Congress Movement itself had become redefined by having the Congress Alliance in 1952, by having the Kliptown meeting in 1955, albeit that they exist on racial lines. We asked NUSAS to become a non-racial student body. We asked NUSAS to become a non racial student organization, an institution that it had the physical capacity to do so. We could not return to historical nuances and the historical facts, and ignore the co-existence of their NIC, TIC and the African National Congress on different racial lines. The situation demanded that. But the situation did not demand the existence of NUSAS as a uni-racial student body in an environment which was not ideal for non-racialism. They could become the instruments on the different campuses to lead our reaching out. They could have affiliates in institutions like Fort Hare. Fort Hare an affiliate of NUSAS before the 1960's.

IAIN: Fort Hare left after NUSAS had rejected the Freedom Charter

MEWA: Yes and the question is why. The question is why? Now we Freedom Charterists from the other end said `No, NUSAS should be persuaded to adopt this. It is not a Marxian document. It was a non-racial document and NUSAS as a student body could not be allowed to take that kind of a position. Just as at Hiddingh Hall in 1964, I led a discussion to the Afrikaans Studentebond to say to them that your destiny is linked to this too. Your destiny is embedded in this. It is because your destiny is embedded in this Freedom Charter that I say this as an individual, I don't say this is NUSAS's position, I don't say this is the University of Natal's position, my personal position was in deference to that vision I have for you. That is why I say today that I today reject the South African flag. Had I been given the opportunity I will trample on it. I would and I do reject the current National Anthem because these are all symbols of our national disunity whereas they ought to be the symbols of our national unity. Now in that context our task was monumental. We had to reach out to NUSAS leadership and NUSAS rank and file to persuade them to say this is a course for us. On the other hand, we had to reach out to the instrument of our own oppression. The Afrikaanse Studentebond body was a student wing of the Broederbond. So in taking on the Broederbond, we were literally taking on the system. So that was an intervention that we as a black sector at the University of Natal sought and much credit has to be given to the entire institution of the black sector at the University of Natal, not to people only like me, but then several of them. The late Ernest Gallo, the late Harry [INDISTINCT], the late, a whole range of them, Johnny Makatini, and a whole range of them. Now we on the other hand had another dilemma. That with the emergence of all that was happening in the country, that NUSAS itself rejected the Freedom Charter on the one hand, and on the other hand in the same period the attack on the Freedom Charter became the *modus operandi* for the PAC. And the PAC had a presence on our campus. For us to say that if you do not know how to co-exist you will not be able to negotiate or reach out in those days. For you to co-exist as fellow South Africans we have got to learn the art as to how do you survive and how your survival must not be at the destruction and dissolution of your opponent. Now in many schools of thought this would be a liberal view. It is not a liberal view, it is a revolutionary view. A revolutionary view because there are people and you cannot as a revolutionary ignore people. Your first task as a revolutionary is not to alienate people but your own cause becomes debased in many ways if one does that.

IAIN: You understanding of multi-racialism and non-racialism?

MEWA: We are on record for many, many years that the conflation of the two concepts was not done by us. We acknowledged the existence of racial groupings. We acknowledged their existence. We acknowledged the existence of different communities mobilizing at different levels towards one objective. In that context you could call it multi-racialism. You could call it multi-culturalism as the system began to call it. But we deep down in us knew and the Freedom Charter - nowhere in the Freedom Charter do we talk of multi-racialism, do we? Nowhere. As early as 1955 we talked of a non-racial, democratic, united South Africa. Now we were not going to have an artificial intervention to ignore that different racial groups existed. But we are equally on record, and emphatic to say that in this diversity - culturist as it might be is our richness. That this diversity has injected different aspects of our cultural

backgrounds so as to enrich South Africa, not to weaken it, nor to use it to divide people on racial grounds. So the attack from the right on the question of multi-culturalism or multi-racialism, whatever the case is, was a non-starter. The attack from the so-called left by the PAC guys and what have you and the Non-European Unity Movement at that stage were equally non-starters. Now I am not going to reflect on this. I am not going to claim moral high ground, but history has proven that they were wrong and that the ANC Chartists, NIC Chartists, TIC Chartists and so on were right.

IAIN: In the period when you are Director of Studies, NUSAS formally adopts the slogan "Democratic Education. It's a big change?

MEWA: Well I think NUSAS will have the strength of character to ensure for history that they were persuaded to do this. To have democratic education in a democratic society is not a slogan engineered by them. It grew out of struggle with them from the whole sector of the South African population and many of us were there to ensure that we went beyond that for NUSAS to become the student wing of the liberation movement. Which in some way it did. Because despite whoever they were in the ARM were all members of NUSAS just as Nelson Mandela was a leader of Youth League. He was not the President of the ANC. He was a youth league leader when he established MK. Now I can't, I would never, never in my darkest days of debasement, reflect on the integrity of people who engaged in MK or ARM. I don't like the concept because I don't like what they did. But who I am I to judge.

You see, Leftwich and company were good people. All these were good human beings with different levels and different thresholds of pain, different thresholds of fear. He broke down and he gave evidence against his own pals. But so did so many people in the ANC and in MK. We don't like to admit it but should I be subjected to a similar threshold or a similar situation, what would be my threshold? I am not here to pass judgement. Each one of us has made contributions towards the liberation movement. We had a consensual ethic, and it was a revolutionary ethic. Because a revolutionary ethic for me is to say that we have got to have revolutionary ethical behaviour amongst ourselves. I cannot ask for that from others and veer away from that revolutionary ethic. That revolutionary ethic is in the first instance accepting all human beings as human beings.

IAIN: And I can understand that: its part of the soul searching you've discussed. But there must have been times when you told some people they weren't going far enough. I mean I can imagine you as a student activist.

MEWA: Well all students are idealists. All students are actively engaged in activities which are beyond the calling of the parents, and parents can get very worried.

IAIN: But they must have been fairly hot discussions in class, and afterwards in meetings?

MEWA: Very, very, and very, very honest from our side. Actually to be fair to the black students as such there were times when we did go beyond the bounds to provoke them into activity. We didn't want rhetorical unity in the campus classroom. We wanted unity and action. How are these students going to be involved in unity and action. I will give you an illustration. In the late 50's, early 60's when the students at Allan Taylor Residence went on strike and they said we will not eat that food that was provided for them, the likes of us did not hesitate to reach out to people like in NUSAS - white people - to ask them to be identified, not to be associated, to be identified with the cause of these students. In 1959/60 when we were engaged in the boycott of graduation ceremonies we reached out and provoked, coerced, and influenced and persuaded the student body generally, NUSAS in particular, because every member of the student body did not subscribe to NUSAS politics. It was our belief then and it is our belief now to keep that sector weakened by this kind of identification was our objective. We needed to weaken the stronghold of white politics from domination. What better way to do that than to reach out to the family, to the students, when the students could tell their parents - `Look daddy, look mummy I think you are wrong. Racism is wrong.` That racism is an evil, that the very principles are the fake system that you have in church, Sunday to Sunday. But in between those Sundays you do everything that is anti-Christ. For a parent to be told by her own child or his own child, that between Sunday and Sunday there are activities in relationship to other human beings who happen to be black were unchristian. My deductions it that it doesn't take a fool to know this, it doesn't take a genius to know this but we are reminded so by our own children logically meant that we are leading critical lives. There emerges a new concept in that student body, people do not understand this and do not realise that wearing torn jeans and dirty clothes by the student community at the University of Natal or at Wits - I am talking of the white student community that in order for them to be radical or to be considered radical they had to wear dirty jeans, they had to wear torn jeans. But we were fighting as we did not be wearing dirty clothes. You do not identify yourself in dirty clothes during the day, at night you sleep in a flimsy, silky, clean deodorised pyjamas in a home that has electricity and running water. The water in your bath is what a black student uses in a whole month.

This was what Ghandi would call Sarvodaya, the welfare of all. How do I see this? I lived at Phoenix Settlement where I had running water in an environment in which there was no water. How do I react to this? I use this personal experience, my own personal experience. I couldn't suddenly share the water that was there with everybody. I didn't have the resources. But I did have the resources to tell myself that when I shave, I need to use enough water. When I have a bath, I need to use enough water. When I move around in my motor car, I need to realize that there is a person down the road who has also got to go to work. Not in a liberal attitude but in an attitude of becoming sensitive to our environment, sensitive to your neighbours.

Now in 1960, I couldn't pay my all University fees, and I couldn't write my exams. I was working at the time but didn't have adequate funds. And the person who helped me - it was in 59 or 1960 I think - was a child of a former street sweeper in Durban who lived in Springfield which was the first experiment to

providing farms for free to retiring employees of the Durban City Council. He was sharing his poverty with me. I came from a very affluent family. My father did try and share his affluence with some people, like building schools and what have you. He had enough to share but was this man sharing his poverty with me. In some ways we were saying this to the adherents of NUSAS who happened to be white students. We found a lot of criticism - not only from the Malherbe's of this world - who was the Vice-Chancellor at the University of Natal at this stage. Not only from the white conservatives, but even from the so-called liberal establishment media. Let me finish this point. I didn't expect anything better or different from NUSAS. In spite of the fact there were some beautiful human beings associated with NUSAS like Leo Kuper, and Edgar Brooks. At that stage NUSAS was not fundamentally different from the Liberal Party. The liberal party itself was not in any way sympathetic towards the adoption of the Freedom Charter as its *modus operandi*. Yes indeed we pushed the adherence of NUSAS beyond their own accepted norms to such an extent that in 1964 it brought matters to a head. Crunch time was when NUSAS was asked to adopt a document saying that it now must become the student wing of the liberation movement. Whether we were tactfully right and strategically correct or not is irrelevant. If there is anything like the spoils of liberation it has got to be shared because of what we have done together.

IAIN: Let's talk about the Hidding Hall meeting.

MEWA: Well we pushed the student leadership, like Jonty Driver, he was the Deputy President. The President of the Afrikaner Studentebond was an Afrikaner, from Pietermaritzburg campus. His father was a rugby player - very famous rugby player - I forget his name. While we persuaded them to have this joint meeting with the leadership of the NUSAS people and the Afrikaner Studentebond. We learnt a new technique.

IAIN: And the date?

MEWA: Sometime in early 1964 I think, my God 40 years ago

IAIN: Sorry, a cruel question.

MEWA: Sometime then 64 I think.

IAIN: After Rivonia?

MEWA: Yes after Rivonia. We learnt a new technique. The vulgarised version of that technique was called [INDISTINCT]. But what we did do was to ask for the moon and then get another thing. And then get another set of people to ask for something that was in the middle, in between which was our objective in any case, in the first place. That is how we got around them but we couldn't get them to join. But we got them to agree that what was happening on the campuses, the division of ourselves as

human beings and the division of our minds in the growth and development were policies of apartheid. That is what our objective was: to get the student community and the Afrikaans circles to disassociate themselves in essential ways from the establishment of Afrikanerdom. That was achieved.

IAIN: And the moon was?

MEWA: The moon for us then was for the succeeding generations of people, for the establishment of a non-racial, democratic society. I didn't visualise then nor did I visualise in 1982/83. Until 1983 I used to say to my kids that we are only laying the foundations for you and you guys have got to build on resistance politics, and liberation politics. It is never going to be given to us on a plate. The white person will fight like a tiger to defend his position in South Africa. But in 1983, when for the first time in the history of South Africa, South Africa's resistance politics, we succeeded in mobilising all those representatives who believed that they were against apartheid. Whether they were civic bodies, church institutions and political organisations and when we met at Mitchell's Plein on the 20th August 1983, something happened to me as a person. With all the activities that preceded the launch, we thought it was just the mobilisation against apartheid which indeed it was and between the 1st July and 20th August people like myself did a lot of ground work in the different provinces to launch the UDF. I remember I was entrusted with the responsibility to reach out to the worker movement. In those days you only had COSATU and another group called SAWU. When I came to the Eastern Cape to meet with the leadership of the workers that was my responsibility among others, succeeded in getting SAWU to be affiliated and associated with us. We couldn't say the same of COSATU which at that stage was under the tutelage and control of the so-called white left. Incidentally Alec Erwin was one of them, among others.

IAIN: Hidding Hall: just briefly. Was there any mention of political prisoners, clemency ...

MEWA: No what was mentioned - I had a NUSAS conference simultaneously - was that we should condemn the people who had made possible MK and I stood up to say 'You do that on my dead body. You condemn the people who are in jail!' No, we refused to allow for it to be tabled and it was withdrawn.

IAIN: And you were co-chairing?

MEWA: No. I was a delegate from the University of Natal. We said we will have another kind of motion to which will condemn apartheid that gives rise to this kind of rebellion where fellow South Africans had got to establish armed resistance against fellow South Africans. We converted it to our advantage to say now you need to look at what causes this kind of emergence. And within months of that resolution the ARM was established. We can't take credit for the establishment of ARM, I think it was the consciousness, we provided a crucible for the left within NUSAS to do what they did. And by then there Beyers Naudé - it wasn't just Braam Fisher - that we could use to talk to the Afrikaners. He

had emerged who could make a full acknowledgement of his Broederbond foundations and who in the witness of his Church, the witness of Jesus Christ life.

He took a decision: that what his Church was doing was wrong. I was instrumental in getting Beyers Naudé to go to Allan Taylor Residence to talk to black students as to why he did what he did. The catalytic point in their lives perhaps was Sharpeville when innocent people could be mowed down with impunity. So whether it was Beyers Naudé, or another - I think that the person's name was Deyssel. I am not certain who joined him in leaving the Church.

IAIN: And the Broederbond.

MEWA: Leaving the Broederbond and the Church and providing an alternative institution, I forget what it's called, Christian something, they provided for themselves an alternative institution and then became engaged in the affairs of the African followers in the independent churches in South Africa.

IAIN: Christian Institute?

MEWA: Christian Institute. What was Beyers Naudé saying then? He was my guest in my home many a time. He lived in my home when he came to do his Christian work with AICA, the African Institute of some such know church; some indigenous churches of South Africa. I remember when my son literally rejected Beyers Naudé as a person who had the right to live in a home. My son was 7/8 years of age then in the early 1970's was socialised in apartheid, and was also socialised by denial.

IAIN: Brought up while you were banned?

MEWA: Yes, was born a year before I first got banned and brought up whilst I was banned. And Beyers Naudé went out of his way to reach out to this young child. I have never forgotten that. This child was assassinated in 1993 and yet 20 years before that this child was looked up by Beyers as a child who needs attention. Not for my child's sake but for his sake. But when I think back now even for my child's sake, that going back to NUSAS in those days, the late 60's/mid 60's many things happened. It led to the disintegration of NUSAS. The disintegration of NUSAS as an institution was brought to being, in my view from within NUSAS, by the consolidation of the right within NUSAS. By then many people had begun to say apartheid was irreversible. In 1964 or thereabout when we were struggling with all these things, the Liberal Party itself began to question itself. So much so that by 1966 it had disbanded. I don't know why it disbanded, they must explain it themselves. The Liberal Party was comprised of people who belonged to the African community, Indian community, white community, Coloured community. People like Jordan Ngubane who was a member of the PAC was the Liberal Party's National Vice-President. One or two reasons. One, they didn't have the political strength to survive, to challenge or be engaged in the politics of challenge. It was all very good to issue articles and press statements on

the one hand, on the other hand perhaps they thought of its own irrelevance in the South African system of political co-existence.

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

IAIN: We were talking about NUSAS. Tell me about the Botha's Hill meeting.

MEWA: The venue chosen was because of its security and its isolation from the rest of the people around. It was easy to keep vigilance as to who was coming and who was going out. There was a closed session. Most of it was closed. Some of it was open - people could come in and go out. But we had a sense of the entire process in that period which was to discuss the issue whether NUSAS should or shouldn't become the student wing of the liberation movement. There was consensus on it that it should and unfortunately there was a leak. It became notorious in some circles, in circles of the establishment and it became very popular in other circles. The kind of support that that position got from NUSAS was phenomenal

IAIN: When was this, when did it take place?

MEWA: 1964 I think, 64/65

IAIN: So it's in the same period as Hiddingh Hall?

MEWA: Almost one after the other. 64 or early 65. But definitely before I got banned and I got banned in November 1965. So it could have been between the beginning of 1964 because I was there myself.

IAIN: How many people were at this meeting?

MEWA: A very select group and in the higher echelons of NUSAS and presided over by Jonty Driver. And I think it broke Jonty Driver at that stage because I don't think he could take the pressure. The other guy who was the Deputy President was - I forget.

IAIN: Can you remember?

MEWA: No. There was also a Communist Party leader there. He was from Howard College. The nature of the discussions that took place was very frank and we had the emerging white left, not that there was no white left outside, but in the student wing because I don't think the preceding guys could have been considered to be part of the left. Maybe in respect of the right within the white community or white community *per se* it could be considered to be as left wing. We took it as given that the people whom we are relating to knew what we were talking about. I remember using these words - 'If my position is

considered to be left and radical let's find out why. My position on the Group Areas Act is well known and if the abolition of the Group Areas Act is considered as a radical left position, then I am a very proud radical leftist. If my position on Bantu Education is radical and leftist, then I am very proud to be one and I went on and on. And the only thing that I seek on these lean shoulders of mine is health. I like people to share the burden so that all of us become leftist and radicals, show this position. Be immorally justifiable. I was as I am today. And in this context and the context of what I consider to be an establishment politics, whether our intervention was not going to redeem us. Because I myself was a beneficiary at that stage of selective privileged education. I was a beneficiary of school and a college which is only for Indian people and I knew this. The Inanda Seminary and the Ohlange Institute were islands in our country because of the number of institutions that were not like that. But in broad terms I too was recipient of privilege. People were very young, like John Daniels, for example. And the others who were in the left movement, some of them took radical stands, which I myself could not understand: I didn't expect them to go that far. I remember on the morning of their arrest, the morning that Spike de Keller and his colleagues were arrested on campus in Pietermaritzburg, where we were present at a NUSAS conference in the middle of the night. It became a salutary thing for a lot of students: that this can happen, this is happening in their ranks. I am not going to say that we had the finest of analysts but we realised what was happening. Some left the country. Like Jonty Driver. Others remained. I don't know of a single NUSAS person who didn't leave South Africa ultimately. To that extent it was

TAPE 2, SIDE 2

IAIN: Right we were talking about NUSAS left and exile. And Botha's Hill? How many of you were there?

MEWA: I don't know the exact number, about 20 odd of us. Quite a few of us, actually. The delegates from Fort Hare, myself, and one other called - I forget - from Natal, a few white people: students. Jonty was one them who came round to think like that and he became the spokesperson for that group. And the question arose as to how much damage had been done to him, and it was quite considerable. But somebody had to go. We couldn't do it, because the agenda would have been pretty obvious and the retaliation from the state would have been of a different kind. Some of us who left the country went to - I remained but I got banned and successfully thereafter refused to leave the country even though there was a view that I should leave. But I was too much rooted to the family here and too much rooted in Phoenix that I couldn't even contemplate it.

IAIN: Mewa, at this meeting a group are asking the NUSAS to become the student wing of the liberation movement. Who gave you that mandate?

MEWA: That mandate came out as a result of interaction - with a realisation that the student body was polarised. We realised that the student body did not reflect ... The two national student bodies at the

time did not reflect South Africa demographically. We also realised that one was an extension of Afrikanerdom in its lousiest form and the other was an extension, in many ways of the liberal status quo. Because I did not believe then and I do not believe now that the universities would have led anything or allowed anything to undermine them, so this call came from us from the black sector. And when that analysis when done was went through to the leadership of the liberation movement. And I didn't hesitate to be integral part of that interfacing. In the knowledge that even before me, there were students at the University of Natal and such institutions who had not only lobbied for this but had in fact actively engaged in activities which would alienate or divide the, if divide is the correct work, the student community in the white sector.

IAIN: Now I understand that perfectly. Who were you in communication with?

MEWA: Just to make it very clear, in 1960 when the State of Emergency was declared after Sharpeville we had assumed the responsibility, as students, to take upon ourselves a responsibility of all that was necessary. You are not disorganised, there was a link with the underground at that stage, and we became the people who could do this. The assumption of the leadership by the student community, in this case in the Durban metropolitan area, was rooted at the University of Natal, Medical School and the Art faculty. And I can innumerate a whole range of people. The most formidable name that comes to my mind is the late Ernest Gallo and the late Johnny Makathini. In that period were these two people who had national profiles in terms of acceptability and credibility. There were also people like Jacob Zuma, who had played a very low key role in whatever ways they played their role. But I remember him. He came to meetings at the University of Natal. There were also members of the underground - MK - hovering around. Ronnie Kasrils and the left in the white community who were urging us to do whatever needed to be done. This was as early as 1960/61, that period and then what we did together to resist the position of the State of Emergency, the marches that we organised and mobilised against this. And as time went on a working relationship based on a consensual view on the political situation in South Africa grew. In that same period, you must remember in 1961, I had lent myself to the establishment of the Clinic, where there were doctors giving voluntary services. Several of them were ANC members with Communist Party leanings. In this range were people like Dr S A S G Randeree - currently in Canada - he was a doctor then in 1962 when he was drawn in by me and we developed a working relationship. In December of 1964, I assumed a particular kind of responsibility underground with concurrence from the people, leadership, in the country at this stage. I made the first effort to take away people who were going to be state witnesses in the trial against M D Naidoo and others in 1964. I took Dr Randeree to the borders of Botswana and South Africa. On the heels of that, within weeks, I took the late M P Naicker and his friend Steve Naidoo. I don't know if he had another name and then on the heels of that I took out of the country Josh. Josh was one of our foremost trade unionists. All of these were of Indian origin and did not expect white people to take them out because they would be very suspicious of whites or African people to take them out. So it was a pact that was used by the leadership here and they entrusted

the responsibility for me to devise the ways and means to do that. And at that stage simultaneously, I was involved in this kind of politics on a student level.

IAIN: Now people that you are taking out are not people who are going to be staying state's witness or were you taking them out as well.

MEWA: One or two of them were threatened or were being forced to become state witnesses. And the others were going to be accused.

My first altercation at University, political altercation was with the Moral Re-armament Movement, who sought to establish a position for themselves at a student level. I didn't say I hated them or disliked them or whatever. You interfaced ideas and I gave them the significance of non-violence. That non-violence is a gift to the human race. I didn't know the words of the Gandhian Trinity – this is a recent phenomenon when I began to use it. But I could talk about the divinity in each one of us. The person who was my staunchest opposition, because I was quite a senior person, in terms of student ages, was a fellow called Kader Esak who became a lawyer and was on Robben Island. He was my most formidable opponent and I guess I was his most formidable opponent. He would use swear words on people like Gandhi and I would extol the virtues on non-violence. He would glorify his heroes. I would say he was a hill, remains a hill but a hill in transition and passing. He cannot have left his foot prints on the sands of human history because it shifts. Not because I knew my Gandhi as today. We'd argue on a range of topical issues. Nkrumah, Egypt. The Congo, and African Unity. A year before - 1964 - I could contextualise what needed to be contextualised and what was happening in South Africa, because beneath the confidence of successful apartheid regimes, confidence was a fear. A fear based and rooted in the knowledge that with the passage of time, forces operative against them would overwhelm them. Some of us were equipped with that advantage of knowing what is to be done, not arrogantly.

IAIN: Now at this time you're also meeting adult whites with already powerful public reputations. And the big issue was separate development.

MEWA: In 1963 I was interviewed by Gwendoline Carter herself at Wits and I said that separate development is an excuse for racism and bureaucracy. The Transkei was in my view, even though it was born, it was stillborn. It died when it was born. Like all the other homelands. You could not re-divide or detribalise an already detribalised people. Soweto was in existence. Here was an attempt to stop the establishment of townships and to re-tribalise people on the basis of race. The first occupants of Chatsworth were being retribalised on the basis of race. But they forgot one thing. The architects of this policy forgot one thing that to get to African people they could not successfully retribalise in these ghettos. Play one against the other at the best of times, deepen and sharpen their antagonism sword at each other. They couldn't do this in the townships. But in broad terms, Soweto was a custodian or a place where all these people lived together, with all their differences. Now when the township whistle music developed, when the theatre developed in the townships, when hymns developed and the bible

was received I don't believe that those people could have said, hey you know what, you are Zulu-speaking because you do not understand as I do or we cannot sing these songs whether they were music or the music borrowed from Mozambique. This is where people like Nelson Mandela were reared. This is where people like on the political level, this is where religious leaders like Tutu were reared. This is where you had people like our great singers Miriam Makeba who is an envoy for our country today, were born and reared. This is the birth and the redefinition of the African spirit. Now whilst the creation of ghettos like Soweto were reprehensible to our minds, we couldn't disregard the emergence of a kind of resistance that was built by people who lived together cheek by cheek together.

IAIN: These white politically aware people ...

MEWA: I think it was taken as given by them that this is the reality, that we don't have the capacity to change it. Wasn't it then said that lots of liberals hated apartheid but thanked God that the National Party was in power. They mobilised themselves as liberals and the Progressive Party or whatever the case is and believed in this kind of aspirations but when they went to the polling booth they voted for the National Party. Nobody went with a gun to the heads of every English-speaking white citizen to say you do this or else. It was a voluntary thing. Now that voluntary voting meant a deduction on our part. It was very nice to be engaged in student politics at that stage and on the assumption that there were 5,000 students at that stage at the University of Natal who had the right to vote. How many of them voted for the National Party, how many of them abstained from voting at all? And how many of them voted for the Progressive or whatever they were called then. The Liberal Party never got a seat in Parliament.

IAIN: You shared a platform with Edgar Brookes?

MEWA: Yes I shared quite a few platforms with Edgar Brookes. I shared a platform with him in as early as 1959 on the Separate Universities Act at the University of Natal. I shared another one with him in the early 60's in Pietermaritzburg on the same questions. And another funnily I shared a meeting with him at Phoenix Settlement where he presented a Ghandi lecture. I think years later in 1971 there was a campaign for clemency meeting in Pietermaritzburg which I addressed and I didn't expect Edgar Brookes, the elderly statesman, to be speaking my language. But he was there. There were many informal meetings. I liked the man. He is a good intellect.

IAIN: It is clear from you correspondence and his replies that you have a considerable mutual respect for each other.

MEWA: I think we did. I think we did and this would then further prove and establish my point about the divinity in each one of us. And I think Edgar Brookes had gone far beyond my own understanding of world affairs and current affairs. He was far ahead, and an excellent historian. I think he was a beautiful gift from the White community to South Africa in terms of his understanding

IAIN: Much forgotten now.

MEWA: Yes indeed much forgotten now

IAIN: And probably overshadowed by the memory of Paton.

MEWA: I think we have two different kinds of people. There are definitely two different kinds of people. Paton was not an academic. I think they belonged to the same church. But one could discern when one has lived as closely as I have with Paton and Brookes and it is not judgemental but one could discern that distinctive difference between the two personalities. I am not saying that Alan Paton was not humble. I am not saying that at all. But one could not resist the temptation of saying to oneself in the company of Edgar Brookes `Who am I compared to this pillar of strength. Who am I compared to this humility and modesty?' I didn't have a social occasion or a working relationship with Edgar Brookes as I had with Alan Paton. I was tempted to call Alan Paton father, dad, I used to call him dad. And he loved it. And I said to him I cannot for the life of me see myself working with you on these projects at Phoenix without calling you a dad. As people do know him, he had a very strange smile. I could only win his approval when he laughed, but not when he smiled because you could never decipher what the smile meant. But when he laughed, you could say well here is the man who is enjoying your company, here is a man who likes you.

IAIN: When did you meet Paton?

MEWA: Many, many years before that. During my student days. When he was living in Gillitts. At Botha's Hill when his first wife was still alive. She was not ill then but in the late 50's very early 60's, I remember we went up with a delegation from NUSAS to meet him. Before that it was a relationship between him and us from a distance. But before I got to varsity in 1958/59 I had one meeting with him in Leo Kuper's in upper Glenwood. It was a dinner and I could sing, not western songs, but I could sing and I could run my hands on a piano. I remember him coming up to me and saying, `Hey I didn't know you could sing` because at that function I did. That was my first meeting with him. Thereafter it was, at that stage I was still a counter-hand at Leo Kuper had built up this association with Paton, so I had that advantage. And Kuper built up the association.

IAIN: When did he first come to Phoenix Settlement?

MEWA: No, no I had nothing to do it with Phoenix Settlement then. He came to where I was a counter hand and he used to come to the Zulu dances done by Cecil Williams. Those are the conditions in which I met him. I don't know why they said this but they were silly I think. I mean Leo Kuper was silly and I think the others were silly with him for saying to people like Cecil Williams `I want you to go to and

meet this man. It did a hell of a lot of good for my ego but I think they were silly, I don't know why they were doing it. But that is when I first got to know Cecil Williams in 1956/57 and Cecil Williams became a very critical man in the life of Nelson Mandela. So I don't want to comment on that - that is between Mr Mandela and him. But I knew Cecil Williams then, in the company of Leo Kuper and his company and Alan Paton in that context. But if Cecil Williams could be trusted to drive Mandela alone and we had a relationship with these liberals. He had a programme, he had a vision, he had an acknowledgement to be made and expressed. And I think we were on the same wave length not that I was Mandela, don't get me wrong. But it was happening at the same time simultaneously in history that young people like us interfaced with a new situation around us could change, and how much more if we can change, others too who were equipped with knowledge and instruments of education in them. In that context NUSAS became an organic area of growth for the growth and development of other individuals. Neville Curtis and his sister, I forget her - Jane, I can't remember. Now these people became very active people. I mean Neville Curtis came to Phoenix and I was banned and house arrested - why do they do this, why. It is a funny experience in life. It is strange phenomenon and I bow my head in humility and prayer in saying to the Creator, whoever You are, wherever You are, I don't know you, I cannot fathom you, I do not understand you but this I do understand. When two human beings polarises, the leadership of NUSAS on the one hand and the leaders of the ANC on the other have one thing in common in coming up to Phoenix Settlement. I don't think it is the strength of personality, don't get me wrong, I might be very strong in what I say, but this is the historical privilege that I have had.

TAPE 3, SIDE 1

MEWA: Having earlier walked away from my family, when I went back to the University, I realised that my late father had made a provision in his Will that if any one child of his indicated his or her desire to further his or her studies that his estate would be bound to support him or her. Now this was a contradiction in my life. I wanted to be at the University, which meant fees. The only thing that I asked of the Executors of my late father's estate was whether they could promote me at University which meant then recalling the resources my own father had left. And they refused - his Executors refused. My mother was amenable because she wanted to do that. But the other Executors, two of them happened to be my brothers, elder brothers, they refused. And on reflection I realised where the deep contradiction that had been in my life when I chose to make an application to court to have the desires of my late father fulfilled. Wherein I got letters from my lecturers, and others who belonged to the liberal establishment at that stage, and they were prepared to come and give evidence to say that I was a capable student, mature enough to be at University. And the contradiction lay in the knowledge at that time that I was now involved in the Will of my late father's Testament. I retracted and withdrew the case, not because there was a sudden upsurge in me of not wanting to be contradictory or a sudden upsurge in me for higher morality and the knowledge that my mother was going to get drawn into court to give evidence for one child which meant evidence against another child. That I could not take. And I instructed my attorneys at that stage to withdraw the case. The Counsel was John Wilson in that case, for whom I had a

tremendous amount of admiration and I think he was prepared to not charge a single cent especially after I gave him my reasons of not wanting to proceed with the case. Now I myself was a manifestation of that kind of contradiction and I was not going to sit in judgement of other young people like me or anybody for that matter albeit belonging to a community of privileged people, albeit having different skin colours, that we are not capable of contradictions. So in the context of all that turmoil that I have referred to as my own consciousness was the crucible and which I had to make these decisions in a non-ideal situation, objectively and subjectively.

Now in that context pushing NUSAS to do what I would love it to have done for it to do was an unconscious mission, an unconscious mission on the one hand and conscious effort on the other. It had its ups and downs, no doubt of the fact. We didn't live ideal lives then, and the first interfacing that we had with the liberal grouping and Douglas Irvine - he's still around. And for him to come to prison during the days when I was incarcerated in jail to bend over backwards to accommodate me and contact the outside world are all crucial to what and how we succeeded. Not succeeded in dividing the ranks of NUSAS but in succeeding in some ways in raising the level of consciousness as to where our destinies are linked. Notwithstanding the fact that successive leaders of NUSAS left the country to become students at Oxford or in America or wherever they are at the moment: it was a poor showing. It could have been better.

Now I want to talk to you about TACON.

IAIN: TACON

MEWA: Theatre Council of Natal and the Catholic Prayers Guild in 1969

MEWA: Catholic Prayers Guild with Jeffrey Sutherland and Professor Sneddon. I must tell that you what my approach to Professor Sneddon was in 1969. I went up first to Jeffrey Sutherland to choreograph a ballet. The music was chosen by me, and the words and narration by me. The ballet was on the life of Ghandi in 1969, and was part of the centenary celebrations. Now, and this is very important as far as liberalism was concerned. Professor Sneddon, the Head of the Department's Speech and Drama, for which Jeffrey Sutherland was a lecturer. He had agreed to do it for a small fee of R500.00 - to choreograph this, provided I provided the costumes, the music, narration and he would provide the venue to rehearse. But it was contingent on getting permission from Sneddon. Well, I said let's go up to her now. He said no we haven't got an appointment. I said let's go up to her now as she was living on campus, in one of the quarters there. It was night time. We knocked at the door, she opened and looked at me and said `I know your face`. I said to her, `Yes you ought to know my face, but I have come here to extend the finest apology to you that you will ever get. I will not be saying sorry to you with the word sorry. I have a proposition that I am going to make you.`. Now she is a master in English and she says what the hell are you talking about, just like that what the hell are you talking about. And I said `No with

the historical antipathy that existed between you and me over the years at the University of Natal, that will be put behind us from this day on, how's that?' I had even forgotten about it but how's that and I said `Because I have come here to ask you to be identified with a project that I am creating and I am in trouble and I have come to ask you, as your son, your son is in trouble. I have this dance/drama scheduled to be staged in six weeks and I like this man's work, I like his enthusiasm, he is a young man just married and he cannot proceed with this without your permission.` I said `This will be an indication to the rest of the world that you and I have forgotten our past and you and I can work on a common task together`. She asked Sutherland, can you do it, after reflection of course, after more questions, he says yes I will be able to do it provided he meets the finance and you meet the requirements and I said yeah. She says go ahead and do it.

The show was scheduled to have one show: a one and a half hour show in one evening as the high point of the celebration. When we went to the hall the show was scheduled for 8 o'clock in the evening and I got a telephone call to say that there is a traffic jam outside the Orient Hall and people have already filled the hall up and they are queuing up outside. And I was a banned person at that stage. I didn't know who the security police were at that stage, I didn't know who they were or where they were lurking. I went and stood up on the steps at Orient Hall and pleaded with the people. I give you this undertaking, if you do not violate the fire rules here in this hall, you will not leave this place without seeing the show but until then you have got to remain outside. And the people listened and I went up to Jeffrey Sutherland, without even consulting him, to say can you have two shows tonight. And I had to explain to him. He talked to his cast members and they all agreed that they would do it, that they will do two shows even though they advertised the one.

INTERVIEW ENDS