

Interview with Geoffrey Bindman by Chitra Karve, 13 November 2013, for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom
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My name is Geoffrey Bindman, and I have been a long time supporter of the Anti Apartheid Movement. I was a member of the Movement and was asked to be the Chair of SATIS at some stage.

CK: How did your involvement in SATIS start?

I can't recall precisely what brought me into it but I remember I was asked to be Chair and I remember sitting around a table in the offices of the AAM in Mandela Street at the start, and some some of the faces around the table were members of the original SATIS Committee, Paul Joseph, Victoria Brittain, I think Diana Collins was part of it as well. Those are all the names I can remember at the moment but there were six or seven of us and our aim was to campaign for specific cases of people on death row. We ran a series of campaigns including the Sharpeville 6, which is the campaign I most remember and our campaigning activities consisted of putting out leaflets, getting petitions signed, visiting 10 Downing Street to hand in petitions, issuing bulletins, leaflets, newsheets about some of the worst atrocities and abuses of the legal process that were taking place in South Africa at that time.

CK: Do you remember before you started as Chair in 1985, working on behalf of the Durban 6, the UDF leaders who sought refuge at the British Consulate?

Very much so, there were many unforgettable experiences associated with that period. I can't remember the exact chronology – when my involvement with SATIS started in relation to the UDF people - but I do remember my involvement with the UDF came about quite differently from SATIS. The lawyers representing the UDF in Durban were very concerned that access to them in the British Consulate would be made very difficult by the British Government, for example restrictions had been placed on visits to them of their families and their lawyers so the lawyers decided to come to London and lobby the Foreign Office directly, and they wanted to have a lawyer with them to show them the ropes about how to approach the British Government. I was asked to put my name forward, and I was the person who assisted them. When they came over we met the Foreign Secretary and officials at the Foreign Office and I became very close to those two people, one being Zak Yacoob, now a Judge of the Supreme Court – the Constitutional Court of South Africa, the other Yunus Mohamed, a lawyer in Durban (and founding member of the UDF) and they invited me to go to Durban to observe the trial of the UDF leaders which took place in Pietermaritzburg. I was a member of the British branch of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and happened to know quite well the Secretary General of the ICJ, Neil Macdermott a British Lawyer, former Minister in the Labour Government, and I contacted him and said it had been suggested I should go to the trial in Pietermaritzburg and I asked if I could go as his representative, and that is what I did. This meant I had an official status there, as the representative of the ICJ at the trial. That led to an even closer involvement in the South African situation and of course I got to know a good deal more about the legal set up there as regards apartheid, and subsequently I suggested to Neil Macdermott that we do a full scale study of the legal aspects of apartheid, particularly the security laws. He agreed, and I was invited to lead a longer examination of the security laws which meant spending some weeks in South Africa, travelling everywhere, frequently in a somewhat clandestine

manner, meeting people who were on the run, or in hiding, even being smuggled into prisons. It made a big difference to me, that original connection with the UDF, that first trip to Pietermaritzburg and Durban was the first of a number of visits.

CK: You did become Chair of SATIS around that time, so you were doing different but linked work with respect to South Africa.

Yes, clearly they were pointing in the same direction.

CK: After your first visit as ICJ representative, you led a delegation to meet Malcolm Rifkind. Can you recall that?

Yes I can certainly remember a number of delegations to see Ministers. I remember one visit to another Minister and I do remember visiting Malcolm Rifkind when he was Foreign Secretary. We did not get much joy out of him in terms of any sympathy or offers to take any action in criticising the SA government. I remember coming out of the meeting and saying to our little group which included Trevor Huddleston 'that was rather a waste of time wasn't it', whereupon Trevor rounded on me sharply and said 'it is never, never a waste of time to lobby ministers or to make any kind of protest, representation or petition, to seek justice'. He may not have used exactly those words, but he was telling me off sharply for appearing to regard any such approach as a waste of time. So that taught me a lesson which I have remembered and I have told that story many times. I have often been discouraged from pursuing campaigns of various kinds and when I am tempted, as inevitably everyone must be, to give up and regard something as hopeless and a waste of time I always remember what Trevor said and decided to follow his advice and not give up.

CK: You said something earlier about being smuggled into prisons, that sounded pretty exciting.

Yes of course our mission was planned by a small committee, an unofficial committee in SA, this was the ICJ mission to look at the security laws. The committee included Beyers Naude and John Dugard and they provided us with some secretarial assistance so we could get things done and there were 4 of us, all from different countries which were not subject to visa requirements for visitors, British visitors were free to go to SA, the same applied to Germany, Switzerland and the Rep. Of Ireland so the mission had one lawyer from each of those countries. The four of us were provided with a programme of meetings and interviews throughout SA – we were there for several weeks – and we had considerable access to people who were in both camps. In the early stages we made no approaches to the SA government, and I believe our mission was kept secret in the early stages, but after we had been there a couple of weeks the Secretary General of the ICJ contacted the South African Ambassador in Switzerland and told him that we were there in SA, and invited him to arrange for us to meet Ministers which we did. We met the Justice and the Home Affairs Minister, and we then produced our report, which I edited, and was published as a book called 'South Africa : Human Rights and the Rule of Law'. It was published by Pinto Publishers on the instructions of the ICJ and it contained a very detailed account of the security laws and all that we found wrong with them.

Do you remember the campaign on the death sentences?

I do remember very well the campaign about the Sharpeville 6. I think we did quite a lot to bring that to public attention in Britain. We held vigils outside the Embassy, we presented petitions, we had meetings, I remember one meeting where the sister of Francis Mokhesi – Joyce Mokhesi – took part in some of our meetings and spoke at them. I remember one in Covent Garden, in the Africa Centre, where the General Secretary of the TUC spoke on the platform with us, we had other meetings and articles were written in the press, we did our best to bring pressure on the SA government to refrain from carrying out the executions of the Sharpeville 6. 'Save the Sharpeville 6!' was the campaign which ultimately was successful. So I think in some ways that was the most important thing that SATIS achieved during its life, although obviously we can't take credit for the outcome but we made a contribution.

Looking back now on your work broadly in the anti apartheid movement and SATIS do you feel that it was time well spent?

Well, going back to Trevor's remark again, one should say such time is always well spent. You never know what you may achieve. One can also achieve harm, in a way, one must never lose sight of that, one's dealing with vicious people who in a perverted way think that they can punish you by doing exactly the opposite of what you wanted to do but I don't think that happened in this case. The work of SATIS was part of the wider campaign, wider impact of public opinion worldwide on the apartheid system. I think it contributed quite well to the mass movement that eventually brought an end to apartheid.