

Int This is an interview with Archbishop Mpilo Tutu and its Monday the 25th of August (2008). Archbishop, on behalf of SALS Foundation, we really want to thank you for agreeing to participate in the LRC Oral History Project. I wondered whether we could start by...if you could talk about where you think your sense of social justice and injustice developed. For example, if you look back on your early childhood memories, what were particular experiences that might have led you to have such an acute sense of social justice and injustice?

DT Well, thank you very much for your kind greetings. I...I can't pretend that I...I was politically conscious at an early age. That's...that would not be true. In fact, I mean, looking back, ja, I'm amazed that I...and I think many of my contemporaries were not as politically conscious as...well, the 1976 generation and after. I was born in Klerksdorp and then my father was a schoolteacher and they were very peripatetic in those days, so we moved from Klerksdorp to Ventersdorp (laughs), notorious Ventersdorp, which produced Eugene Terreblanche and I often say, if South Africa could survive E.T. and D.T. from Ventersdorp, it could survive anything. But...that's where I learnt Afrikaans and we lived in the location. It was...it was actually a crazy pattern because Indians lived in town, but were not allowed to go to the white schools so the...the school of which my father was principal had Indians and so-called coloureds and blacks all mixed up together, and you didn't go around with a heavy burden of, oh, just how awful it is. We enjoyed ourselves. I mean, we played and did all kinds of crazy things. I was the only child in that ghetto township...well they were called locations, quite rightly, who had a bicycle and...I mean my father used to teach...to send me to town to buy newspapers. The one incident that I...well, maybe two...one was when I was taunted by white boys as I passed them, they shouted out, *pik, pik*, (pitch) and I at the time stupidly thought, they were meaning the agricultural thing, the tool, and so when I was at a safe distance, I shouted back, *graaf, graaf*, whereas of course they were saying, *pik swart* (pitch black). So it was a racist taunt. But those were things, I mean; you ran the gauntlet of that kind of thing and didn't allow it to affect you too much. But the other thing that I do still remember, and I was probably maybe seven or so, was passing the white school and seeing two location urchins scavenging in the school dustbin and thinking then, I mean, the government used to give free school feeding to whites, not to blacks at that time, and...and that most of these white kids preferred the lunches or I mean, the picnic lunches that...the packed lunches that their mothers prepared for him rather than the government ration. And then they threw away perfectly okay apples and sandwiches, and I...that is one of the images that has stuck in my...in my head, but I didn't...I don't recall that it filled me with anger or...it was maybe more than anger, was just a hurt...a hurting for those children that that should have happened to them, that the conditions were such. Then I...I...we went to live in Roodepoort and again, I mean, it was...ja, well, you are in a location, and then I went to school in Western Native Township...it was called Western Native Township but then it became Western Coloured Township, and then I met Trevor Huddleston...and went to live in Sophiatown, the CR had a hostel...

Int CR being...?

DT What?

Int CR was...?

DT Community of the Resurrection.

Int Ok.

DT Yes. That's the religious community to which Trevor Huddleston belonged. And I remember that I actually met Alan Paton then, he was at that time in charge of a reformatory in...just...I mean not very far from Baragwaneth Hospital and I actually read parts of Cry the Beloved Country in manuscript. Trevor Huddleston let me have those. Ja...when I was still in primary school, one of the things...about the one time we really got to being somewhat politically minded was reading a history text book that said...it was describing the situation in...on the frontiers, and it said, almost invariably, the Xhosas stole cattle from the white farmers and the white farmers always captured cattle from the Xhosas, and we...even then thought this was peculiar, since these people came from overseas and where have they got their cattle from in the first place? But that's about the one time when we were sort of remotely politically minded. It was...I don't...I wouldn't say that anything specific in my childhood made me...you know, sometimes you...you have a crusading sense quite early on. I didn't have this. I mean, all I...the one passion I had at the time was I wanted to become a physician.

Int Really?

DT Yes. Oh, I was so keen, you know, I wanted to become a doctor. And then it became even more so when I contracted TB and was in hospital for twenty months. I was saying, now I really must become a doctor, I want to find a cure for this disease. That was my passion. When...when did I...I would say I was a very late developer. And it all I think came about when...I didn't go...I was admitted to Wits Medical School but couldn't take up my place. We didn't have the money and so I went to a teacher training college and became a teacher, but then when they introduced Bantu Education, both my wife and I resigned as teachers. And I went to train for the priesthood. And I would say, I mean, that then the spark was lit as one began studying the scriptures, but even so, I mean, it didn't turn me into say a campaigner. I subsequently went to work for the World Council of Churches, and we were based in London, and one of my colleagues came from Latin America and I was then exposed to liberation theology for the first time really, and to black theology in the United States, which we did...I mean part of my work entailed visiting the United States. Yes, and so you might say then the rest was...

Int History?

DT Yes. I returned from...we returned from England...we'd been there for about three years. Previously I'd gone to study and we were there for four years, then I...we went...when I went to work and then I came back to become the Dean of Johannesburg. Now that might be said to mark the time when I began to appear more vociferous because I...I had this platform. I was a novelty, the first black to be Dean...to hold that position. And the media...the media actually were very...I don't know why they...somehow they...they...I can't say they made me their darling but I was provided with a platform and the media reported fairly extensively. I think part of the reason was that a lot...well, most of our leaders were in jail or were in exile or under banning orders of some sort or other, and I often say I became a leader by default. And that's not just making out to be...isn't he modest? The truth of the matter is I wouldn't normally, I don't think...well ja. And it's happened, ja, I...I could...I shouldn't say you could guarantee, but most times any utterance I made tended to be given a fairer degree of publicity, and perhaps the most overt act that I performed this time was, I think, May of '96...of '76. I wrote to (John) Vorster and it was a fairly long letter in which the gist of it really was that if they didn't hear the cries of blacks and demonstrated by, and I put down some things that they could do to show that they were taking us seriously, I said I fear that we are going to have a...an explosion. We...I think we made a mistake. I happened to be in a gathering somewhere and was with a guy who was a journalist. Up to this time, this letter was a confidential letter. I mean, it's a personal letter to the Prime Minister, but I talked to this man and he said, look, he would guarantee that they would...it would be published, and it was. I mean, it was given a spread in Natal Mercury or something, and I think we...it was a breach of etiquette, that I had not warned the Prime Minister that I would publish the letter. So it may be that that added to his annoyance and he never replied. I mean, they never even acknowledged receipt. You just heard, I mean that he said, I mean he didn't think that I had written the letter, I'd been put up to it by the opposition, and basically, he dismissed it contemptuously. Well, that's just a few weeks before June the 16th. Ja, then I mean, I...I became Bishop of Lesotho, I preached at the funeral of Steve Biko and then I came to become General Secretary of the SACC, and that was probably the most active political period of my life, from 1978 to '84. There, I mean, we were bang into it with your...your feet and all, because we were active. We gave...we supplied people with funds for legal defence in political trials. That didn't endear us particularly to the government. And we...we gave support to the families of political prisoners, of detainees and banned people, and we also ran a program, which brought families of political prisoners, especially people inland, to come to Cape Town to go and visit their people on Robben Island.

Int And that was done through Cowley House?

DT Yes, This was called Dependants Conference. And we got as the chairperson of that community, Robert Selby Taylor (laughs), one of my predecessors as Archbishop, who had an impeccable record. They couldn't...they couldn't touch him. And one then met a lot of these lawyers who were ready to defend people, Dullah Omar and the Geoff Budlenders...some of them have become judges and the (Sydney) Kentridges...Arthur Chaskalson at one time when I was I think at the SACC, asked me to come and plead in mitigation when Tokyo Sexwale and others were appearing before the court, the High Court in Pretoria, for terroristic activities. And I remember that in the course of my evidence, I said, I came...one of the points that Arthur

(Chaskalson) was getting me to stress was the feeling in the black community, frustration and anger and so I said, well, I'd come particularly to plead that these young people, they were mainly young then, would not be sentenced to death. And the judge interrupted me; it was an interruption that I think nobody would ever want to say is the most annoying...because he said this court is not of the intention of imposing the death sentence. Phew! So Tokyo...Tokyo (Sexwale) tends to think, I mean, that we...I saved his life so he thinks he likes me. But I mean those were the kinds of things that we were doing then. And...oh, then we had...I mean then you had Legal Resources Centre, the other...and George Bizos, Geoff Budlender. Geoff Budlender especially, I think, was very close with my wife who at the time was running a program called the Domestic Workers and Employers Project, and sometimes getting them to recognise the minimal rights of their domestic workers, and Leah (Tutu) was...worked quite closely with Geoff and once she too was...she fell foul of the law, I don't know what happened. They...it appears she had...she...they exchanged very sharp words with a white woman or something, I don't know over what, and Leah (Tutu) was the accused and I think Geoff, it was Geoff who defended her from the Legal Resources Centre.

Int Right. At what point, Archbishop, did you then get approached to become the patron of the LRC?

DT I don't even know! (Laughter.) I will...I mean I'm...I'm hopeless really with...you know, I'm hopeless with statistics, I'm hopeless often with dates and things...

Int Was it post-apartheid or was it pre?

DT Oh, it was pre.

Int Right, it was pre.

DT It was pre, ja, I mean, no no no, that...at least that I know. (Laughs.) No, I mean, these were incredible people because you know, one of our staff persons...and people would call me sometimes, say no, you are really sort of making it up. When trouble broke out in what we used to call the Vaal Triangle, I sent one of our staff people, Tom Manthata who is now a Commissioner of the Human Rights...

Int Right.

DT I sent him...now he'd been detained and tortured and so on, and I said, hey Tom (Manthata), just go and see what's happening there and whether there's anything we and the Council might be able to do. And so he went, but subsequently he was arrested and you know about the Delmas Trial?

Int Yes.

DT Well, Tom was one of the accused.

Int Oh right....

DT And the Minister, Mosioua Lekota was another of them. And George Bizos was one of the...one of the defence counsel in that matter.

Int And so was Arthur Chaskalson...

DT What?

Int Arthur Chaskalson, as well.

DT Ja. So, I mean, we kept bumping into each other, being as it were on the same side, and Sydney Kentridge came to be our counsel when we...the South African Council of Churches was being...was being clobbered with the Eloff Commission. So you could almost say that...I mean our relations were so good, almost incestuous, don't you think? (Laughter.) But I mean, sometimes when you sit down and you think of, I mean, all the people who contributed to where we are in a way, because I mean they just went on going on, and when you think, I mean that by the way there was a time when black advocates didn't really have chambers. I mean, I remember Judge Mohamed, our first Chief Justice saying, how he had a small little nook, a cranny in the...and he wasn't allowed to have tea with his, what would have been his partners. And yes, I mean, you said, oh how wonderful that there should be this kind of vindication where he ends up being our Chief Justice, but I mean, you know, you think of all of the humiliations that so many of our people were carrying. And Dullah Omar was a very dear friend of ours, and I mean, I still remember as if it were yesterday, we were sitting...Moir Henderson...I've just...Moir Henderson was an incredible woman who ran the Cowley House operation of Dependants Conference. She was incredible, and whenever I came down from Johannesburg to Cape Town, I stayed...I stayed with them, and Dullah (Omar) had got a scholarship to go to London University, and the only thing was...and I think he was going with his family, but I'm not quite...I've forgotten that particular detail. And we were sitting and waiting for the passport and just a few hours before that, ja, he heard that these guys had refused him a passport, and we were sitting there and I mean, the anguish and the...he was actually I think due to have left that following day, the...I mean just being deflated, you know, and you...I think many of...especially our young, are probably not always aware of just what it did cost to get us where we are, and...and one hopes, I mean, that we can find a way of...of reminding them, they tend on the whole perhaps, to romanticise, I mean, say they romanticise Robben Island and forget actually, I mean, that for a very long time, it was hell for the people who were there, I mean. Now when they go and they look in Nelson's (Mandela) cell there's a bed, they didn't have beds, I mean, black prisoners didn't even have long pants, they had to wear shorts and that...that was part of the price and, I mean, one is so thrilled that people like Arthur were able to be vindicated and to be recognised. Others not, you know. Others have sometimes not been...Dullah, it was wonderful too, that he should become our...

Int Minister.

DT Our Minister of Justice. He was...he just was a remarkable man, because, you know, I would sit and think about the TRC, how they had...they tried to kill him by...he had a heart condition and was on medication and they tried to switch his tablets so that he took the wrong tablets and would have died, and thinking this is the man who is piloting through Parliament, legislation that is going to end...granting amnesty to people who tried to kill him. I mean we've had some great people in this country.

Int I'm also wondering, Archbishop, that...you are probably patron of many organisations, but you've continued to remain as patron of the Legal Resources Centre. I'm wondering what's your sense of the value that an organisation like the Legal Resources Centre lends to South Africa, even now in a post-apartheid context?

DT In many ways you'd say it is even more necessary because it's so easy for us to become complacent and, you know, blasé, and you really do want an institution that is there constantly reminding us of why we were involved in the struggle, it was for the sake of the people, and when you see some of what has developed, I mean, how some people have become so incredibly wealthy and we have left behind the bulk of our people, reminding people of the values enshrined in our Constitution, I mean, reminding us that things like housing, health facilities, education, are not the preserve of the privileged. They are a fundamental right of everyone, and institutions like the Legal Resources Centre constantly are a reminder that the individual person matters, and is ultimately the subject of all of these rights that we have enshrined in our Constitution and especially now, upholding the centrality of the rule of law. I mean, one of the sharp criticisms that we levelled against apartheid were the fact that it subverted the rule of law especially with things like getting rid of Habeas Corpus in the detentions without trial, the fact that people were banned and not given the opportunity of knowing what evidence had been provided to substantiate whatever accusation had been levelled against them. I mean, we are on the way to being so careless of what ensures that each one of us can, one, be able to speak freely, I mean, public discourse at the present time is woefully inadequate and it's...well, there's hardly any because those people who think at the moment that they have power and...are not...I mean, they are doing exactly the kind of thing that the apartheid government used to do, but they didn't challenge the veracity of what you said, or to point out whether it was true or not. They just shouted you down. I mean, when you made a statement, they didn't test whether it was one that could stand up to scrutiny, they engaged mostly in a rhetoric that sought to be intimidating, you shout down your opponent, and some of the things that we have been hearing from some of these people, is...is very disturbing. And the thing, I mean, when they say charges must not be brought, the case must be dropped, on what basis, you know? That you don't know I mean, that the...the precedents that you are setting, because one of the things that you could say...even, I mean, even the apartheid South Africa, even with the judges that were generally political appointments, even they had to try to stick to the rules of evidence and that was part of the justification for defending people, that even when you felt that the laws were weighted against...against us, you still did see that it was important to establish in court even...even if you know it was a lop-sided justice. And

I mean, some of the things that they've said about judges...*(It's more than thirty minutes?)*

Int (*it's forty-one.*) I was wondering as a final question, what your sense of, you said the Legal Resources Centre is important for...even more so in a post-apartheid South Africa, but what areas of public interest law do you think are really important in a post-apartheid country like South Africa?

DT I would say, I mean, the representation of those who are still the voiceless, you know. And there are umpteen, umpteen of those. People who can so easily be taken advantage of by very sharp tricksters and even by our, I mean, the system, you know, you're thinking here of things like access to anti-retrovirals, you know, that we...there are people who have died in our country who needn't have died, who've died because...well, we've got to say it, I mean, that for a very long time our President held a view that was unorthodox, which influenced what was the policies of the Health Department. Now, it's in areas of that sort where you say, but people do have a right to health and do have a right to access and they need desperately an organ such as the Legal Resources Centre, to claim their rights. It's the same, I mean, with public safety. I think, I mean, that an organisation such as the Legal Resources Centre would have been in the forefront of the effort to save the Scorpions, for instance. Because it's quite clear, I mean, that the arguments that are being used are, I mean, are manufactured. They may have done some things perhaps, I mean, releasing juicy stuff to the media, but there's no question at all, I mean, of how effective they have been. And we...you see frequently, we don't have a historic...a historical memory. We are forgetting...we are forgetting how the NATS subverted the fact that they had the powers of making law, so they subverted Parliament, and we are on the way to doing that, using Parliament as a tool, and think, you know, that laws are their own justification. And they think that because something is a law that it is necessarily right, morally right. And they have to go back and remember that the NATS, for instance, I mean just one of the silly things that they could do and they did, making it...making it illegal for a man to sleep with his wife if he was a migrant worker and she came to town without the necessary permission. I mean, that's crazy, but they could say, well, that is what the law says, and many white people in South Africa used to say, but it is legal. Yes, it is legal but it is not moral, and we are in danger of walking in that direction where, because they have the numbers in Parliament, they reckon that they can...they can play ducks and drakes you know. I mean, there's a suggestion, I mean, that they might...they might...if the charges against Mr (Jacob) Zuma are brought, they could very well change the Constitution to say that a sitting President cannot be charged, but Madiba (Nelson Mandela) went to court as President, I mean, and stood in a court as sort of an ordinary person, because he had this deep sense of respect for the rule of law. And I mean, I just hope that we...we will wake up in time. If we don't, that...I mean, if those people who are wanting to move in that direction don't, that we may have to re-invigorate and re-mobilise civil society.

Int Absolutely. Archbishop, thank you very much. I know I've taken more time than ...than the thirty minutes, but I want to thank you and you are indeed a very

courageous voice and sometimes perhaps even a lonely voice, but you always speak truth to power, so thank you.

DT Thank you very much.

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