

Edited and Annotated Interview Transcript of Mewa Ramgobin interviewed by Iain Edwards, Ramgobin's Parliamentary Office, Old Assembly Building, South African Parliament, Cape Town, Monday 10th March 2003

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TAPE ONE

MEWA: In that period after the explosion of the bomb¹, and even though I'd set up an office in Verulam, it was very difficult to escape my desolation.² It was the people in Verulam who helped me. They showed me such warmth that I realized that this banishment to Inanda wasn't for nothing. It was then that I began to really understand what converting adversity into advantage. And I began to understand my Gandhi much better. I was probably too close to him what with Phoenix and all that.³ Before I was probably just cocky.

One of the things I tried was to mobilise people on different issues. We had a grove of big mango trees at Phoenix. I'd pick them, or collect them from the ground, clean them and box them in a presentable way. I'd take them to the so-called elite of Verulam and Tongaat and sell them to these people telling them that the proceeds were going to Phoenix Settlement. There were some fancy suburbs going up in these towns. Later we'd build a house there too. And with my boxes of mangoes in my hands I could reach out to people, as a politician who'd been banned, house arrested, now banished, and bombed and show to them and myself the capacity, if not the audacity, to carry these mangoes to people and reach out. I had no hesitation to do so. I started with this.

IAIN: And you were raising funds for the Settlement?

MEWA: It was for the Settlement. The implications of this were wide and varied, and bared fruit almost ten years down the line. It was these very people who became the financial and social basis of the UDF in these towns. And in Verulam, right next to my office was George Sewpersadh's office⁴, where Griffiths Mxenge was doing his law articles⁵. So I could have

¹ Ramgobin was the first person in South African history to be the victim of a letter bomb. On the 9th March 1973 Ramgobin opened a parcel from a supposed international address, which exploded in his office in downtown Durban. The Durban police's subsequent behaviour was dilatory at best. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Documents 73,74, and 75 and image 37 which is the *Sunday Times* photograph of the incident.

² On Ramgobin's persistent anger at the behaviour of state agents see "Imitations of Light, darkness, and fury" in Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp. 146-149.

³ Phoenix Settlement was Gandhi's first ashram, where Mewa Ramgobin's wife, Ela Gandhi was born and where the Ramgobin family lived until 1976. See <http://showme.co.za/durban/tourism/a-visit-to-mahatma-gandhis-phoenix-settlement/>

⁴ Lawyer and Ramgobin's right-hand man in NIC affairs, banned for a five year term in 1973. See "Griffiths Mxenge" in Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp 20-21 and <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/george-sewpersadh>

⁵ To soon become a prominent human rights lawyer, and a leading ANC underground cadre in Durban, he was assassinated by state secret police in 1981. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/griffiths-mlungisi-mxenge>. Married to Victoria Mxenge, a trained nurse who later also trained and practised law with her husband. Very active anti-apartheid activist in UDF and underground activities, she was assassinated by state agents in front of her children in 1985. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/victoria-nonyamezelo-mxenge>.

direct consultation with them, ostensibly debating a point of law, meanwhile we'd be discussing political affairs. I remember one incident very distinctly. Halton Cheadle had come up from Durban and the four of us were having lunch.⁶ George's and my offices were so planned that you could do many things in there. He still has the same office now. All four of us were having lunch together and this was in direct violation of my banning orders because I could not attend a social gathering and this was certainly a social gathering. But George's and my offices were divided by a stable door. So here is a white man sitting with an Indian guy and an African man and on the other side of the open stable door is another Indian chap. and in the heat of our discussions we had forgotten what we were doing and I could reach out to Griffiths' plate and get the pieces of meat that I wanted or do so with George. We did this naturally and freely without any compunction. Right in the middle of that lunch Cheadle raised his voice to say `Comrades I have a problem with this meeting`. So we shut up because we wanted to listen to this guy, see what his problem is. `See, I see comrade Mewa. I know he is thinking too fast for us, I know he is eating equally fast and I know he is doing two or three things together. But one thing he has not done. He has taken food from Griffiths plate, and from George's plate, but he has not taken anything from my plate`. So I took his plate and gave him my empty plate, and my lunch was over before the staff could come back and tell people that they'd seen me meeting with these guys. Now these were little episodes in our lives, innocent social episodes with deep political ramifications. And in that little area in Verulam we had professional people who were SAIC people. Town councillors and so forth. Then we had people like Ismail Meer, who was a listed person.⁷ His offices were just across the corridor from mine. But at that time I developed a relationship with some people that were very solid and firm. One was Sonny Reddy. He's dead now, but if I even just looked poorly he'd phone his wife asking he to make some crab soup for Uncle Mewa. And then within a year or two I had to leave Phoenix Settlement and live in Verulam, but the foundations of these relationships had been built.⁸

IAIN: Ismail Meer had his office in Verulam?

MEWA: In Verulam yeah and there were several people there.

IAIN: He looked after you quite well?⁹

⁶ Law student at Natal University's Howard College campus and an SRC and NUSAS campus and national leader. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/michael-halton-cheadle>.

⁷ Trade unionist, lawyer and political activist, Meer was `listed` in terms of South African security legislation and thus prevented from participating in certain forms of public activity. Married to renowned sociologist Fatima Meer. Became an ANC member in the KwaZulu Natal provincial parliament. Died in 2000. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ismail-chota-meer>

⁸ According to Ramgobin, he, together with Meer, Sewpersadh, Paul David - another human rights lawyer and with Ramgobin a later fellow `Durban Six` of British Consulate sit-in fame - became known amongst anti-apartheid circles as the `Verulam Axis`. Ramgobin *Prisms of Light*, "The House on the Hill" and the `Verulam Axis`, pp. 152-154.

⁹ In his memoir, *A Fortunate Man* (2002), Meer scarcely mentions Ramgobin. The book was published after Meer's death with his wife completing the manuscript. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/professor-fatima-meer>

MEWA: In the 70's, early 80's and then when I was in jail – in all that time we built up a very strong relationship. By 1973 he became the Chairman of the Phoenix Settlement Trust Working Committee, not the Trustees, but the Working Committee. In that period that both he and I were nominated to become Trustees of Phoenix Settlement. There were some legal problems, so that didn't happen. But in the midst of all that, a rumour did its rounds to the effect that there is a person who is going to desert the movement and that he has become an integral part of the – I don't know the details. I did not pay too much heed to this because I knew in my own heart that South Africa was my home, and that my destiny was linked to its fate. But it came to my ear that he was somehow involved in spreading the story. I wrote to him to clear the air.¹⁰

When I did get a passport, the passport indicated the route that I had to take and the route that I had to take back from India but they didn't give the route within India. So when I left Johannesburg and my first stop was Sri Lanka, Colombo. They didn't tell me what I could and what I could not do in Colombo. I was within Sri Lankan laws. And word got around and I had a meeting with the Foreign Minister.¹¹ One of the things we discussed was the isolation of South Africa, and how we considered it to be a contradiction for Sri Lanka to continue to have a trade relations with South Africa. There was an explanation given, even though most of it was understandable in that it was in their national interests. But the Gandhi movement also got hold of me and I addressed two major meetings on this issue. Imagine: here is this banned guy floating around in Sri Lanka on his way to Bombay in India. On the third day I left for Bombay, and was received there by relatives. I was told, I don't know how far this is true, that I was being trailed in Bombay. People drew my attention to this. I don't want to get into it because I don't know. But they did say to me that until Delhi you have got to be very careful. But then I did a deviation. I spent quite a bit of time in and around Bombay with relatives and I went to the place where my maternal grandparents came from. That was a mind bending experience, for me at least. One of the people who came to visit was the Secretary of the provincial or local Communist Party of India. Within half an hour of us meeting, he asked me whether I could do them a favour by addressing a mass meeting in town. I accepted on one condition: that they get at least three different political parties to sponsor it because I could not see myself being partial to any one political party whilst I was a guest in India. And I made it very clear that my greatest sympathy lay with the Indian National Congress.

IAIN: Ela was with you then? ¹²

¹⁰ See Edwards, (eds) *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Document 105.

¹¹ Mewa Ramgobin met with Mr Tessa Wijevatne (writing on back of photograph unclear), the Sri Lankan Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Edwards, (ed), *Faith & Courage*, p. 355.

¹² Ela Ramgobin – née Gandhi. Community social worker and prominent political activist, Ela was M K Gandhi's grand-daughter, being the daughter of Manilal Gandhi and his wife Sushila née Mashruwala. Ela had been banned on in August 1973. She was elected to the National Assembly as an ANC MP in 1994 and leaving in 2004. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/ela-gandhi>. On Ramgobin's remembrances of Manilal and Sushila see "Manilal Gandhi" and "Sushila Gandhi" in Ramgobin *Prisms of Light*, pp. 5-6 and 9-11 respectively.

MEWA: Yes and my five children. This man turned around and said to me, alright we accept the challenge. They ultimately got five political parties to sponsor the meeting. Fortunately for me I knew some Hindi and interspersed it with English so I could address the meeting. But to have five political parties sponsor this meeting, we had five political leaders coming to garland me. It became a bit awkward and weighty and each time they did that I took it off and put it on the table. The theme that I chose was national unity: as a prerequisite in South Africa for it to move away from apartheid to a democratic society. I did not hesitate to be fair to them and to be in the spirit of openness to absolutely honest with them. I mentioned that one of the greatest impediments facing India at the time was a lack of a national character and this infringed on the development of national unity.

IAIN: Were you making an analogy between here and there?

MEWA: An analogy between separate development imposed by acts of Parliament and what was in existence in India, but without the force of legislation. The self-imposed sectarianism, and how those practices, coupled with the practice of cast, coupled with the practice of minority rights, all impeded the growth and development of national unity in India. This might have been considered to be impudent in a foreign land. But I was not a diplomat. I was a rugged politician who stuck by articulating what he believed in. India was no exception. I had to ask the question. So too I made comments on the Indian national anthem – the current one that is. I pointed out that my kids could sing our real South African anthem. And I will leave that without comment. From there we took our children to the Kasturba Gandhi ashram, where Ela and I got married, in a place called Sabarmati.¹³ Again a similar thing happened. There we sang our respective national anthem – two hundred school children singing their anthem and my eldest daughter singing ours.¹⁴ It was an experience, especially coming children. I then met the mayor, was interviewed by the press, and they made me plant a tree there to mark my visit. I did this and they asked me to say a few words. To the best of my recollection I didn't have a written text, but to the best of my recollection I used this tree as a symbol of what my sons, who were present then, had asked me a year or two before leaving South Africa to India – when I got banned for the second time. My sons asked me 'You know when you get banned, why do you constantly do this?' and I said we are laying the foundations that one day when you grow up to be adults and you continue to suffer as we

¹³ Kasturba Gandhi was M K Gandhi's wife. See <https://www.gandhiashramsabarmati.org/en/the-mahatma/gandhi-and-kasturba.html>

¹⁴ At that time the official South African national anthem was Die Stem van Suid Afrika ('The Call of South Africa') with the anti-apartheid movements anthem being *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* ('God Bless Africa'). In the period from 1994 to 1997 both these anthems had official status. In 1997 a hybrid of the two became the official national anthem. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_Stem_van_Suid-Afrika, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nkosi_Sikelel%27_iAfrika, and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_anthem_of_South_Africa.

suffer today, you will never have the opportunity to say or ask yourselves what the hell did our parents do or not do to change the circumstances of the situation. And I related that incident to the planting of this tree and I said I hope that this in a small way this will be a reminder as you water this tree that you will be watering the national consciousness. It was a very, very harsh thing to say but the press carried that. When I visited New Delhi the news had reached them.

IAIN: And the ramifications in Delhi were?

MEWA: When I visited New Delhi we had a meeting with the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi. I was most flattered by the fact that a twenty minute appointment lasted one hour, twenty five minutes or there about. She asked me how I got five political parties to sponsor one meeting. I said `Very simple, as a visitor here I must not pretend to be partial even to your party, Madam`. I must confess that it was an inspiration. And I must confess one thing led to another.

She immediately in two or three of her aides, two of them were Ministers, one of whom was the President of Congress at the time, and she asked me to repeat what I had said. Which I did. And I also said `I have been to your towns, I have been to your councils, I have been to your schools, I have been to your farms and have seen many things but I didn't see the Indian National Congress`. This is because of the empathy that existed between the ANC and the Indian Congress.

IAIN: And?

MEWA: For me that beautiful smile of hers remains. And then she asks me about South Africa and if I'm planning to return. I said yes. `Back to your banning orders and house arrest?` I said yes. She said but why? She says she'd just had a discussion with the ANC in London, who asked us to accord you all diplomatic niceties.

IAIN: On whose initiative did the meeting happen?

MEWA: I don't know. The ANC.

IAIN: Not through the Gandhi family?

MEWA: Oh no, oh no, oh no. It happened through the African National Congress. The ANC had by then done an itinerary for me in Delhi which was starting off with the African Solidarity

group. We had a meeting at the University of Delhi which I addressed, in the Department of Political Science. Then other meetings with individuals and groupings and journalists ...

IAIN: And who was the ANC representative then?

MEWA: Moses Kotane, But the person who was really in charge of what I was doing was Ahmed Cachalia – Moulvi.Cachalia. He went around with me, taking me to the ANC reception for Kenneth Kaunda when he was on a state visit to India.¹⁵ There I met with the Chairperson of the African Ambassador's group in New Delhi. He was a Tanzanian. And there I met the Chinese diplomats in New Delhi.¹⁶ I had to be circumspect. At the time the ANC was criticising the Indian government for allowing the head of South African table tennis to visit India. But I had to say `But you can't stop him, because he is of Indian origin`. The Ministry raised it with me. The Indians agreed. We were at their Foreign Ministry offices. From that office I telephoned the ANC office in London and spoke to Reggie September who sits with me in Parliament today. And I said to Reggie that I'm speaking from the Indian Foreign Ministry and that the Indian government has no *locus standi* in this matter. He cannot be *persona non grata*. No, I was there under the supervision, in the company of the ANC all the time in New Delhi. And I made one error. I had not visited any one of the Gandhian institutions in Delhi. So on the eve of my departure the Secretary of Mahatma Gandhi Institute telephoned me. He remarked on this issue. I had no real answer. He said can't I come this evening and I said no as I'd other commitments. He wanted to come to my hotel, and I felt very foolish. But my foolishness was tempered with the knowledge, rightfully or wrongfully, that many of the Gandhian institutions were by then infiltrated by reactionary forces from abroad who did not want to see the growth and development of a united India. That might have been high flying, incorrect or whatever.

IAIN: You go to India as a result of letter from ...

MEWA: A relative

IAIN: A relative, on your side of the family?

MEWA: That's right, that's right. When I mean my side of the family ...

IAIN: Whose side of the family?

¹⁵ See "Moses Kotane and Moulvi Cachalia", Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ At a clearly diplomatic function in New Delhi, Mewa Ramgobin met two unnamed Chinese diplomats, and Mr E Shakrullah, the Arab League representative at New Delhi. For the photographs see Edwards, (ed.) *Faith & Courage*, pp. 355 & 356. Note Ramgobin is identically dressed in both photographs.

MEWA: Those who sought my presence in India, ostensibly to see a sick relative or for a sick relative to see me before she dies.

IAIN: You say ostensibly.

MEWA: The real reason was to get me out of South Africa, which I did succeed in doing.

IAIN: Where you aware of that when that letter arrived?

MEWA: Not in the first instance. Not immediately.

IAIN: Who had been doing the caucusing and the organizing?

MEWA: My well-wishing relatives actually, amongst them was my brother and I think there must have been a concerted effort on the part of the family on the other side because when I did go and see the sick aunt, she said oh you are here at last so it meant that she was, if I may use the word, “conniving” to get me out there.

IAIN: They were concerned about the ...

MEWA: Here was a guy that was banned once, banned again, banned and house arrested, bombed and then banished. I remember a letter sent to me from the family after I was bombed. There was tremendous empathy from a family that had been steeped in the political struggle in India. Especially on Ela’s mother’s side.

IAIN: I understand. In family discussions didn’t they stay here for a while, have some rest?

MEWA: No, I think they went one step further. Like good family members they said to me `You’ve five children, you have made your contribution, you have brought some money with you, and we advise you to buy a piece of ground for them around here for their welfare and their safety`. Which I refused to do, of course. I would have invoked a split loyalty. That I was not prepared to do. I reached India in the first week of December and I left India at the end of April. They had given me six months. I had to come back within six months. I came back, with money, and when I got back lots of things happened. I got a heroes’ welcome when I arrived from Mauritius. People jumped on tables, furniture broke, and what have you. There were hundreds, with slogans and placards to a true South African returning.¹⁷

¹⁷ The Ramgobin family arrived back in Durban on the 23rd March 1975. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Document 104.

IAIN: Did the ANC debrief you?

MEWA: No actually it was the other way around. They needed to be briefed by the likes of us, who were inside the country. Because by then there was an emergence of many tendencies: Black Consciousness Movement, the diminishing role of the NUSAS, the emergence again of Inkatha, the consolidation of the so-called nation states, separate development, and the emergence of system orientated politics for Indians and Coloureds.

IAIN: And the revival of the NIC?

MEWA: But above yes, the re-emergence of the politics of the Freedom Charter. But on my way back a very funny thing happened. As the plane was about to land in Mauritius I'm called on the intercom to report to the captain. And the steward came along asking for me. The captain told me that they had instructions that I had to alight first before any of the other passengers, including my family. Which is what happened. I was whisked away. All I was told is that this was on the instructions of the Prime Minister's office. "You are near South African waters and there are many South African agents in Mauritius". My family had gone to the two or three star hotel we'd booked on the outskirts of Mauritius. When they heard this they said "Sorry, you booked at the Intercontinental!" I said "Look, this is actually too much. I have booked at this hotel because I can afford that. I am not going to stay in the Intercontinental because I am not paying for it and then the Mauritian government is paying, sorry". He said "Sir you need to come with us, leave your family but you need to come with us, I will take you to the Prime Minister's office". Once there I was offered a cup of tea and niceties were exchanged. And I met the Prime Minister Sir Dewsager Ramgoolam who told me I would be addressing his full cabinet later in the day.

TAPE TWO

MEWA: And a whole range of media was present. And the Prime Minister asks why I'd refused Mauritian hospitality? I said "Look I don't want to be rude. I do not understand how I could allow myself and my family to live in contradiction to what I believe in. This is no reflection on your hospitality". "So are you still saying no to me?" This went on for a while. And then I heard the most flattering, most inspiring, remarks I have heard from one human being to another. He said "You know if this is how you lead your life, it is little wonder that you remained banned for so long and house arrested. There is no doubt in our minds that people like you are a threat to the regime in South Africa. I want you to know that for as long as you are in Mauritius you and the members of your family will not be out of the sight of my security people. So for twenty four hours a day at this little two star hotel were lived in the presence of black cars with black suited human beings sitting in them watching us. It was very inspiring. It

was a vindication of the cause that we were involved in. It was a vindication of the justness of our resistance to apartheid. And I had challenged the Mauritian government on their ties to South Africa. They said that `The fruit that you have had today, the pears, the apples here on the table are South African. We have a trade relationship with South Africa. It is very important to feed our people, and there are attempts to undermine our government`.

IAIN: Going back slightly ...

MEWA: When I got back on the Sunday morning I didn't know how fast news travels. I left Mauritius on the Sunday morning. My meeting with the Prime Minister and his leadership was most likely on the Friday and the Saturday but when I landed in Durban, the *Sunday Times* had a front page photograph with the Mauritian Prime Minister and myself on the front page!¹⁸

IAIN: 1975?

MEWA: Some time then, yeah. Maybe I was naïve to assume that they would not know. Maybe I was naïve to assume that they would not know what I was doing in India. But more than that I didn't know what my return would have excited such an enthusiastic response from the community. In their midst, now that I was on South African soil I could not communicate with them because now I would be breaking the law to which I was subjected here. So I just thanked everybody, asked them not to break the furniture and we left for Phoenix Settlement.

IAIN: Where the police there to meet you?

MEWA: I don't know. They would be fools if they didn't, isn't it?

IAIN: Not formally?

MEWA: No, not formally. That was it as far as it went for my return, but many things happened in between, details of which would take days to consider.

IAIN: While you were in India meeting with the ANC did they give you any advice?

¹⁸ *The Sunday Times*, Extra Section, 23rd March 1975, p.1. The article with accompanying photograph notes that Mewa Ramgobin and his wife Ela are both banned, and were given permission to journey to India to see Ela's sick aunt. The article then quotes the Mauritian Prime Minister as saying that the South African government's racial policies rightly fill people, including himself, with "indignation", but that it is people like Mewa Ramgobin who give us "cause for hope." See Edwards (ed) *Faith & Courage*, p. 354 for a copy of the photograph. The Extra Section of *The Sunday Times* was expressly aimed at a black readership, with the separately printed section varying in focus depending on geographic locality: so largely Coloured in the Western Cape; largely African in the Johannesburg and Pretoria areas; and largely Indian in the Durban and Pietermaritzburg areas.

MEWA: No there was no need for it. Because we were working in partnership with each other. The likes of me were not involved in the underground struggle. There is no doubt of the fact that they were involved in mass mobilization inside and the isolation outside.

My time in India was necessary to rejuvenate, to reconsolidate, and to invigorate. So when I got back here in 1975 I had assumed a kind of self-confidence which could have boarded on impudence.¹⁹ I can't deny that impudent trait. I'd begun to receive letters of support from Western Europe - places like Sweden - extending solidarity.²⁰ When you receive the kind of treatment I received in Mauritius and India and Sri Lanka you realize that you are an integral part of a cause that is respected.

IAIN: You're back from India. What did the NIC look like?

MEWA: In 1975, M J Naidoo had taken over the reins of the NIC. It had begun to reassess its relevance through the civic organizations it supported. From 1972, for instance, when the bus boycott took place in Chatsworth, they realized the potential of civic organizations so redefine the *modus operandi*. That marked the shift of the NIC from the political arena to the civic arena. It was formidable. I mean we had the mobilization of women, youth, and adults on issues such as housing, rents, water. It became issue orientated. But there was a misapprehension in the minds of some of us, including me principally, that in stressing community mobilization around issues we might become hostage to localisms and conservative and parochial views and lose sight of the need for political built in action

IAIN: Because otherwise the NIC would then become an advanced rate payer body.

MEWA: Which it was, which it was for a while. And with inherent dangers. We realized that every home in the townships didn't have water, whilst every home in Phoenix and Chatsworth had water. So there were desperate methods of organization must logically lead to a desperate relationship between communities who had services and those who didn't. And this led ultimately to the politics of race. So therefore the NIC had to be very circumspect. So with the concurrence of lots of people the NIC came out with pamphlets, publications, and press

¹⁹ There was clearly considerable political gossip circulating fairly widely, and involving not only Ramgobin but also Fatima Meer, and reaching as far as prominent Afrikaans-speaking novelist André Brink, who was an academic at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Brink was part of *Die Beweging van die Sestigies* ('The Generation of the Sixties') literary movement. Embracing modernity, liberalism, racial toleration, inter-religious dialogue, and sexual openness, on Ramgobin's invitation Brink had given a Gandhi Memorial Lecture entitled 'Mahatma Gandhi and his relevance to present day South Africa' at Phoenix Settlement on the 4th October 1970. Within a month of arriving back in South Africa Brink had posted Ramgobin and Ela a copy of his new book - obviously *An Instant in the Wind* (1975) - together with a covering letter, which hasn't survived, which clearly upset Ramgobin, who fired off an extremely strong rebuke. Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Document 104. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_Brink

²⁰ By this time Ela and Mewa Ramgobin were receiving letters of support from the Swedish section of Amnesty International. These letters we sent via Chief Buthelezi, who informed the Swedes of Ela and Mewa's trip to India. Chief Buthelezi's wife Irene was the courier delivering such post to the Ramgobins at Phoenix Settlement. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Document 103.

statements on all of the major political events across the country to politicise people, and make our position clear.²¹ But there dangers in that too. And not just at the level of sate harassment. At some time the NIC in East London invited MJ as president of the NIC to speak on the question of separate development.²² And MJ did, speaking as he said on the part of the Congress tradition. That got him into trouble in East London communities. And those pronouncements were also used as evidence against him in our Treason Trial in 1985. So too another example concerns the experience of 1976 and its aftermath throughout the country. It was a bit disturbing for the likes of me. Soweto did not replicate itself in KZN, it did not replicate itself in the Western Cape or in the Free State. But the kind of youth politics shown in Soweto did manifest itself across the country in the years after June 1976. After 1976 the NIC took certain considered positions on June 1976 and communicated these to our communities. In fact it acted as the stimulus for organizations like the NIC to redouble their efforts in the community. But then the Kwa Mashu schools boycott happened, and incidents of school burning and houses burning happened more frequently across the country. This placed the NIC in a very difficult position. and it was that kind of rebellion took place at the hands of Indian students, the NIC would have been placed in a very difficult situation. I was of the opinion and I hope I communicated this correctly. The NIC could not be seen as supporting the children - the school kids - in the so-called Indian community as the destroyers of schools and so forth. So we could not come out in public support of these political activities in African townships. Given the history of Indian school kid's parents and grandparents as the couriers and custodians – the creators and guardians of the ethos of building schools and clinics – this would have been political suicide. And our core well considered and accurate strategic understanding of how to mobilize amongst communities was to increase services. It was the politics of rising expectations and it worked wonderfully in the new apartheid dormitory suburbs for coloured and Indians. Albeit on racial lines.²³ If the community perceived or saw the Natal Indian Congress to be silent on that kind of destruction or rebellion it would have lost complete support. I repeat it would have lost support, in the Indian community. The leadership of Congress – and by this I mean the ANC - was made sufficiently aware of this. So we encouraged rebellious students, but not to go on the rampage, but rather into the politics of boycotts. And my own two young sons were brought up in that type of political consciousness. This is what occurred at UD-W from 1982 onwards.²⁴ I think that experience led to my one son becoming a thorough solid organizer. Well he's dead now. George was unbanned in 1981 and became NIC President in 1982 or thereabouts understood this. And of course students were then arrested. So we brought in the

²¹ See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, images 28-36.

²² On the history of separate development see <http://www.sahistory.org.za/article/history-separate-development-south-africa>.

²³ Here was the physical development of the spatial political geography of the policy of separate development. Ramgobin was to have huge conflicts with acclaimed author Alan Paton - his mentor and Phoenix Settlement Trustee - over this policy. There were times in their correspondence when the issue could have broken their friendship irrevocably. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part 1, Section 2, Documents 45, 46, and 47.

²⁴ See "The 'House on the Hill' and the 'Verulam Axis'" in Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp. 152-154.

parents, not as parents per se, but as business people and professional people. A very distinct recollection. I went around in Verulam getting industrialists and business persons like PACO's the spice makers to make available whatever food was required by me for the prisoners. And it would go as far as Johannesburg. I got hold of lawyers like Priscilla Jana, who belonged to the BC movement at that stage.²⁵ I forget the exact number but there was large numbers of kids in jails. Some belonged to the underground, like Abba Omar for instance. But they were university students. It became non-racial in the sense that Africans and Indians were in jail together.²⁶

I am sure some reflection must have gone on in there. Now me the person getting involved in this, my attention was quickly drawn by the local community, by the local guys in Durban and Verulam But I was banished to Verulam, so there were limits to my abilities to move around and organise. But I said to these guys `Here is an opportunity for this entire leadership being housed together in one prison, the BC guys there, the Congress guys there, the indifferent people there but they are together. Some of them might break down, others might change, some may just have reinforced ideas. But it is our task to ensure that even if you have got to send ten cans of baked beans there must be a discussion around it!` Which I think happened.

IAIN: You were never President of the NIC?

MEWA: Until 1987 I was not. In 1987 after my unbanning I was elected as the Deputy Chair, Deputy President.

IAIN: Tell me about the work camps. In 1973 you closed them down.

MEWA: I didn't close them down. I didn't have the strength of character to be an onlooker. I was living at Phoenix at that stage. To be a non-onlooker when people in the work camps were visited by police – the security police – and interrogated by them. When mention was made of this in Parliament by the system to say they know what is happening in Phoenix Settlement, and that we are going to get that guy. I was not going to subject young people, and in some cases very young people, in their late teens, to that kind of insecurity. When as an example, the current head of the Department of Community Medicine Professor and his contemporaries were visited by the police and intimidated, I had to go to their parents and explain to them the implications of the harassment and the implications of them being in a work camp. I was asked very forthright question by these parents, some thirty odd years ago. They had struggled to ensure that their child becomes a doctor and was admitted into the

²⁵ "Priscilla Jana" in Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp 171-172.

²⁶ See "Pravin Gordhan, Roy Padayachee and Yunus Mohamed", in Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp 155-156.

University of Cape Town. And now I was subjecting him to circumstances at Phoenix Settlement that will affect his studies. It was a tall order to explain that. But the explanation was not made by me. It was made by a doctor himself. Who said that it was not possible for him to understand his training outside of the training that he got at Phoenix Settlement in the clinic. But all the same we lost a lot of people and when we lost more than we gained in terms of numbers, it had to close.

IAIN: You also said that the camps had been penetrated.

MEWA: Yes it was penetrated to such an extent. I want to do some more research on this. I believe that in that period from the early 1970's that Craig Williamson was a participant Wits student at Phoenix - at the NUSAS work camp.²⁷ NUSAS had many meetings at Phoenix.²⁸ And NUSAS was infiltrated to such an extent that the security police knew exactly what we were doing from day to day and when they pitched up there at some unearthly hour to check whether I had guests or not visiting, they were just playing their part. They knew already.

You know people within families falter under strains. I don't know if it is the correct word but I couldn't see myself doing those things, asking others to do those things which I couldn't do myself. So the dissolution, the unofficial dissolution, of the work camps took place in that period.²⁹ I don't think political work is ever enough but in those circumstances one had to be saddled with the dilemma. What more must you do without exposing these guys, without exposing people. So the period between 1974 and 1976 was an agonizing period – that is up to the period of the 1976 Durban floods. Then things changed.³⁰

IAIN: Was there any question from the Trustees that the work camps or Phoenix itself was becoming too political?

MEWA: There was no pressure whatsoever from the Trustees to terminate activities of the work camps. The Trustees were part and parcel of making Gandhi relevant to people and not just building monuments. I am not saying that each one of us came out of the place Gandhists. No ways at all. But it was a kind of experiences that we went through at Phoenix together as a people which are important. We had the opportunity to make choices. It was

²⁷ Craig Williamson was Apartheid South Africa's true super spy. Educated at the University of the Witwatersrand, he was a state agent who successfully circulated amongst the NUSAS white left, he later became influential in international anti-apartheid organisations, and later as an active planner in South African state cross-border assassination campaigns. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Craig_Williamson, and Ancer, J *Spy. Uncovering Craig Williamson*, Johannesburg: Jacana, 2017.

²⁸ See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Section 1, Part 2, Document 28.

²⁹ The work camps had their own internal difficulties as well. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, Part I, Section 2, Document 63. Rick Turner, the author of the report was a left-wing intellectual in political science at the University of Natal, in Durban. Turner was later to be banned and prohibited from teaching, and then assassinated – in all likelihood by South African police agents - in 1978, two months before his restriction order was due to expire. See <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/richard-albert-turner> and <http://www.sahistory.org.za/r-turner/gallery>.

³⁰ See *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1976/03/22/archives/12-die-in-south-africa-flood.html>.

costly to do that but the end result was far more satisfying than what we put into it. We got out of Phoenix Settlement more than what we put into it. I want to illustrate that with this. In 1976 when I left Phoenix Settlement with my family to live in Verulam Mrs Gandhi had an awkward choice to make. This time on she had to choose whether she is going to live alone at Phoenix or was she going to join us in Verulam.³¹ Having lived with her for something like fifteen years, a period in which all the children were born, and where she had the opportunity not only to mother them as a grandmother but also to mother us in our growth and development with respect to Phoenix. All she had to say to us is that `I am around whenever you need a shoulder, I am around`. And she was advancing in age. She was already seventy plus; an awkward age. We insisted that she stayed with us, which she did ultimately do. But there were those moments when she wanted to just stay, live the night over at Phoenix.³² And sometimes she did. Somebody from Phoenix would stay with her and I would fetch her the following day. I recall one such stay which was a disaster. Being house arrested and banished to the magisterial district of Inanda, one afternoon I myself had to go and check what was happening in Phoenix as the organizing secretary and a member of the working committee at that stage. She as a resident Trustee with Phoenix so close to her heart, accompanied me together with my twin daughters, who were hardly six years of age then.

All five of us were taken out of the jaws of death when at a level crossing in Phoenix - there was no fully fledged Phoenix township then - there was a trailer laden with sugar cane being taken to the mill at Mt Edgecombe to be milled. And the truck stalled or the driver fell asleep, and began to roll backwards towards us. I like a fool reversed my car just as a train came along behind us. I hooted as his rear wheels crashed into the side of my car. The entire right hand side of my car was pushed in. God knows why we were not run over or crushed.

IAIN: And your new house? The one which became known as the `House on the Hill` at `Lenin` Drive?

MEWA: And spent a lot of time then getting involved in building my house in Verulam. That took a bit of time. I shifted into my new home - I moved in on the 1st June 1976. The demands of my children were such - they were teenagers - and they wanted a home for themselves and it was my duty to provide it for them. Phoenix could not have been a home for them. It was a place for me, and where they were born, but they wanted their own home.

³¹ The house was in Lenina Drive, Everest Heights, Verulam, with politically active UD-W students quickly referring to the road as `Lenin Drive`. It was this house which was also called the `House on the Hill`. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, images 18 and 19.

³² To gain an idea of Ramgobin family's life at Phoenix Settlement, developments at the Settlement, and the remoteness of Phoenix Settlement, even during the 1970's, see Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, images 4,5,7,8,9, and 10.

It is customary amongst Hindus that when you enter a new home you lead with a lit lamp. Just as I was about to enter a local Muslim man came wanting to buy my home. I considered it deeply. Financially it would have been a great help, but my children needed it. And then within days of living in the new house Soweto burnt. And I sat with my kids and I told them not to be despondent but not expect their father to ever be free again `Because I cannot sit pretty in this house in the knowledge that Soweto is burning. It is just not on`. And soon streams and streams of people came visiting. By then the Congress Presidency had been taken over by MJ Naidoo and others. And in retrospect the leadership which developed from this point onwards eventually became the nucleus of the UDF and of cabinet ministers in our government.³³

And then something else happened. Senator Charles Diggs arrived in South Africa. Again. I must give you a photograph me with him. This time he sets up a meeting with me at the Blue Waters Hotel, on the Durban beachfront.³⁴ The Verulam magistrate staff delivered my permission to my home. I pitched up there with the Secretary of the Natal Indian Congress at that – Reggie Ramesar. At that meeting I presented a document to Diggs which I am representing no organization because I am prohibited from doing so. I am representing no tendency because I am prohibited from doing so. I am writing this memorandum to you in my personal capacity. I'm making suggestions as to what a country like America can do, through your good offices, for South Africa. I do not expect, given its history that the United States of America will engage in mandatory sanctions against South Africa. I do not expect it to have voluntary sanctions against South Africa. But I expect it to withdraw investments in future. Perhaps it would be a good thing if one could uplift that document from the Diggs files in America. This was given to him in 1976 in preparation for his visit. Deep down in my own mind I was clear there was no turning back. Diggs asked me the explicit question: are you preparing for the day for freedom? Is this document designed to prepare for the day of freedom and thereafter? I said you have got it right. Now I would very much hope and pray to God that somebody could lay their hands on these documents as given to Charles Diggs because it is the same Charles Diggs who in his report to Congress, as Chairperson of the Congress Sub-Committee on South Africa, mentioned that any observer going to South Africa and who wants to be informed about what is happening in South Africa must go to Phoenix Settlement. It was not me, it was Charles Diggs.³⁵

INTERVIEW ENDS

³³ For examples Pravin Gordhan, the two-time Minister of Finance recently fired by President Zuma, the late Roy Padayachee who served in various ministerial capacities, and the late Yunus Mohamed a founding leader of the UDF and later influential figure in post-apartheid South Africa. See "Pravin Gordhan, Roy Padachee and Yunus Mohommed", In Ramgobin, *Prisms of Light*, pp. 155-156.

³⁴ Ramgobin, with Ramesar met Diggs at the Edenroc Hotel in Durban in 1975. See Edwards, *Faith & Courage*, image 22.

³⁵ Ramgobin's communications with Charles Diggs, whose campaign marked the beginnings of the international disinvestment campaigns, was the real reason why Ramgobin received his second banning order, accompanied by house arrest too.