

24th October, 2008

This is an interview with Sigþrúður Gunnarsdóttir who is now a Children's Publisher in Iceland but who was an active member of the Committee against Apartheid.

PS: I got tipped that you were one of the youth who were involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. How was it like?

SG: When I got involved in the struggle in the fall of 1988 then there had been formed an anti-apartheid organization called the "South African Committee against Apartheid" which had been very active in early 1988. I was not in the country then but I heard about them when I came home. I think it was in 1988 that they held a big concert to let people know about apartheid and fight against it and to raise money.

PS: Who were artists participating in the concert? Were there any Southern African artists?

SG: No, they were mostly Icelandic participants and many of the famous musicians in Iceland took part in the concert. I am almost sure that it was during the summer of 1988. I think the group was formed around that time that is in 1987 or 1988 I am not quite sure.

PS: Do you know what happened before that time?

SG: Not much. There was always within the unions, awareness of apartheid and within the left wing political parties also but there was so much awareness among the general public. This wasn't something that the Icelandic public knew about.

PS: Since apartheid had been going on way before 1988 when this group was formed, do you know if there was any engagement by the Icelandic people between 1960 up to when the Committee was formed?

SG: I don't think there was much. People within the labour movements had solidarity with the labour unions in South Africa and also politicians were speaking about apartheid but there was no sort of movement with general participation.

PS: What type of actions did you organize within this Committee?

SG: I think the first major action was this concert that created awareness and after that there was a lot of small actions. The vast majority of members were very young. We were a big group of kids around 16, 17 and 18 years old and we demonstrated in super markets against South African goods and this was when Iceland was still an importer of South African goods. We also demonstrated against travel agencies that were taking people on Safari trips to South Africa, we wrote articles and we had a singing group, I have just found a copy of our texts which we sold for 50 Icelandic kroner. These are texts that I picked up from the anti-apartheid group in London where there was a lot of singing going on there, so I brought them home and I taught all my

friends the songs and we would sing outside the super markets, the travel agencies and we even sang on television.

PS: Did your organizations have any impact on what was going on? I understand you had a very conservative government? Did your engagement create any change in attitude as far as apartheid system was concerned?

SG: I think it created awareness among the Icelandic people and this was something that the vast majority of people had never thought about. Of course they had read or heard about in the news about the apartheid system and knew it was there but they did not feel like it had anything to do with them. So maybe this group had something to do with the general change of view that in a short period suddenly many people found that something had to be changed. Like you mentioned, we had a very conservative government and we were teenagers who may be were not taken seriously. There were also members of parliament who were sympathetic to our views and helped us to talk about it in parliament as well; about sanctions towards South Africa.

PS: What about the role of Media? What role did the newspapers play?

SG: The newspapers were much divided between the political views. The left wing newspaper Þjóðviljinn would publish everything that had to do about the struggle against apartheid and we wrote articles there and also the journalist working with the newspaper were writing articles about the apartheid struggle here and also abroad but I think that the government newspaper Morgunbladid which was very right wing at that time although it has become broader now, I would not think that they published many articles on apartheid.

PS: What motivated your engagement in the liberation struggles?

SG: Me personally? I got in touch when I was 16 years old, living with my parents in London and I got involved in a group called “The City of London – Anti-apartheid Group” and they had a non-stop piquet at that time outside the South African embassy for many years, there was always someone piquet in front of the embassy and yes, I got to know people there and I worked there for several months and then I came home and I was very happy to hear that such a group existed here as well.

PS: For how long did the South African Committee against Apartheid exist?

SG: I am trying to remember but I think it was until 1991 – 92.

PS: Did you engage with any of the Nordic solidarity groups like in Sweden?

SG: Not very much but I am sure that happened in the beginning when they were forming the Committee. I am sure that they were in touch with the Nordic groups even though the contacts were not much.

PS: What about the ANC?

SG: Not directly.

PS: Apart from the concerts and demonstrations what other actions were taken?

SG: We very much used demonstrations and wherever we had an opportunity we took it to demonstrate like for example on the 1st of May. We had a concert with a Cuban Band and we had a singing group singing South African liberation groups. We didn't collect signatures against apartheid or anything like that but we made it a point that people should boycott South African goods.

PS: What about donation of money or some other type of support to support the liberation groups in Southern Africa?

SG: I am not sure, or that might have been done in the beginning and I think that if there was any collection of money at the concert for example the money was supposed to go to the ANC.

PS: Were the actions that you were involved in openly done since you had a conservative government?

SG: No, this was all carried out in the open.

PS: What was the highlight of your engagement in the liberation struggle?

SG: I think probably the highlight was the big concert where people were really engaged in the struggle.

PS: Did the government of Iceland with the other Nordic countries on the apartheid issue?

SG: Yes I am sure they did that and I am sure the Left wing parties collaborated

PS: Did your youth organization have any collaboration with the youth in Southern Africa?

SG: No.

PS: What do you think the support you extended through your engagement gave to the people of Southern Africa?

SG: Well, nothing directly, no donations or clothes or something like that but it changed the general view of the people of Iceland. It made them think about something they had not thought about before and when apartheid ended then you would ask if they were against apartheid I think the vast majority would say yes. So, we managed to tell people about the situation and how unjust it was so that the support from here would be very much against apartheid at that time.

PS: What does solidarity mean to you today?

SG: Well, to think about other human beings and try to do something to make their lives better.

PS: Do you think the type of solidarity that existed then is the same as the one that exists today?

SG: I don't know. It is difficult to tell.

PS: You were 16 years when you decided that even though you lived far away in this little country called Iceland, you were to engage in the struggles of some people that you had never met. Do you see young people engaging in the same way?

SG: No, but of course there is also a small group working now to help Palestine which is of course the equivalent but there isn't this general movement like there was against apartheid everywhere, so no, sadly.

PS: Thank you so much for your time.

PS: Proscovia Svärd

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