

Interview with Sunna Snaedal who is now working as a Doctor at Karolinska Hospital, Sweden. Performed 22 of January, 2009 by Proscovia Svärd.

Proscovia Svärd: Sunna, you were involved in the liberation struggles on Iceland as a young person, tell me about it. How were you involved?

Sunna Snaedal: We were a group of about 20 young people who wanted to be involved and to do something meaningful. We would hold meetings, organize get-togethers of various kinds, and rehearse South African songs about freedom. We would also picket outside stores that sold products from South Africa, in order to raise people's awareness.

Proscovia Svärd: How were you organized?

Sunna Snaedal: I do not remember quite well but there was a couple that was 20 years older than we were and who had been involved in the Palestine group, whom I think organized us from the beginning. We had a place down town in Reykjavik where we would meet.

Proscovia Svärd: Were the premises meant for these activities?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, they were premises which we rented and shared with the Iceland Palestine Group that fought against Iceland's participation in NATO and several other groups.

Proscovia Svärd: I also understand from the interviews that I carried out earlier in Iceland that there were small groups at the University of Iceland who stood for different ideologies and were involved in different demonstrations. Were you a member of any of these groups?

Sunna Snaedal: No

Proscovia Svärd: So, where were you based by the time you got involved?

Sunna Snaedal: I was a student at college and most of us were 16 or 19 years old.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you know of any youth organizations that were participating in the anti-apartheid struggles on Iceland or was it you the college students that were being referred to as youth organizations?

Sunna Snaedal: No. My Group was the only one that I knew of that was working against apartheid.

Proscovia Svärd: What was the role of the media and how did it help you with your anti-apartheid activities?

Sunna Snaedal: Well, the media at that time were openly political than they are now. So, there was a left-wing daily newspaper which was very friendly to us.

Proscovia Svärd: What was the name of this newspaper?

Sunna Snaedal: It was called “Þjóðviljinn.” It published articles on our activities for example when we picketed or it sent journalists to take photographs. One incident that I clearly remember and that was most observed by the media and I think even the national television, was when we held a strike at the International Airport of Iceland where we demonstrated against organized touristic travels to South Africa. This was because we found the advertisement for it from the travel bureau very offensive since it said that, “we guarantee that there will be no apartheid obvious to the traveler” or something close to it. This was really offending. I think we were a group of 10 people who sat at the airport and prevented the people from getting on to the plane. They got quite angry with us but of course they managed to come by us since this was in no way a violent action. However, we made a statement and that was what was probably most observed in the media.

Proscovia Svärd: Was it even observed by the conservative newspaper, Morgunbladid?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, even by Morgunbladid.

Proscovia Svärd: What motivated your engagement in the liberation struggles as a young student?

Sunna Snaedal: I have just discussed this with my sister previously today! I think we just wanted to do something constructive. We were raised in a socialist family and had lots of discussions about human rights in the house but, we had never been active in something that did not involve our parents like in the Feminist Party with our mother. We also got to know Sigthrudur Gunnarsdóttir and Lóa Bjarnadóttir who had been active in some group in London, where there had been continuous picketing for many years outside the South Africa embassy. We got interested in what they had to say and started this group and began attending meetings. It was a subject easy to fall for.

Proscovia Svärd: But why would you a young person who has grown up on Iceland and who only heard about the horrific stories in South Africa get captivated by them and show such engagement?

Sunna Snaedal: Because it was such obvious injustice and easy to get involved in.

Proscovia Svärd: For how long were you engaged?

Sunna Snaedal: I think our group lasted for two years.

Proscovia Svärd: What was the name of your action group?

Sunna Snaedal: It was called SAGA.

Proscovia Svärd: Did it stand for anything?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes it stood for South African Group Against Apartheid.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you have any direct contact with the ANC?

Sunna Snaedal: No. Once there was a man from the ANC called Tim Maseko who visited us and talked at one of the meetings. My sister recalled that he actually lived in Sweden.

Proscovia Svärd: Did your group ever engage with any international solidarity groups like those that existed in Sweden?

Sunna Snaedal: I do not recall.

Proscovia Svärd: Did your Group have any contact with the ANC? You have just mentioned this guy Tim Maseko.

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, through him and letters and we might have sent after some materials too.

Proscovia Svärd: Apart from the sit down strike at the International Airport that you mentioned earlier and that prevented tourists from travelling to South Africa, what other actions did you organize in order to make your voices heard?

Sunna Snaedal: Well, I think that the main actions were those we carried out in the grocery stores because at that time, there was a business restriction that had been accepted by the Icelandic government against South Africa. We soon learnt that importers of various fruits for example canned fruits, would get other labels and re-label the products. The fruits were for example sent from South Africa to the Netherlands and new labels would be put over the South African ones, and the new labels would read, "made in the Netherlands" and when you ripped them off you saw "made in South Africa!" I guess this was organized with many other countries as well because, since there was a problem of exporting products from South Africa and many countries had stopped buying from South African goods. So, we used to go to the grocery stores to make the consumers observant about this. We made lists over companies and encouraged people not to buy anything from for example Rowntree MacIntosh, Shell and many others that we knew had huge business interests in South Africa. We showed people the products that they should be aware of. We used to rip the labels off and show them to the people who were in the stores buying the products.

Proscovia Svärd. Didn't the company owners get upset with you and didn't they take any actions against you?

Sunna Snaedal: They at least called the police but occasionally when they observed that we were ripping off labels, they would ask us to leave. We mostly stayed outside the stores and distributed pamphlets which made the people observant of which companies to be aware of and in particular, which groceries were actually from South Africa.

Proscovia Svärd: Were there any additional actions that you were involved in?

Sunna Snaedal: I don't know if you could call it actions but we had meetings and we would use the music. We enjoyed singing South African songs.

Proscovia Svärd: So you had a choir?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, sort of a choir.

Proscovia Svärd: Did it have any special name?

Sunna Snaedal: No, it didn't have a name but we would be on a show for example which was not political but more of an ordinary Saturday night family show and in some news programs. We sang these songs and got attention for our cause.

Proscovia Snaedal: Are you aware of any Icelandic government co-operation with other Nordic countries in support of the liberation struggles?

Sunna Snaedal: No.

Proscovia Svärd: Why do you think the Icelandic government was so slow in joining the trade embargo against South Africa?

Sunna Snaedal: Because we have mainly had conservative governments on Iceland. I think that was the main problem. With a conservative government there has not been a lot of talk about solidarity towards other countries. I guess we are sort of isolated. It is a bit difficult to get the Icelandic people to actually think that they have something in common with other people or should show solidarity towards people in countries far away.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you think your actions broke this isolation?

Proscovia Svärd: Well, no. I don't think so. May be they helped to raise awareness. I remember when we stood outside the stores, the majority of the people found it rather irritating but there was always someone who stopped and actually asked us for more information.

Proscovia Svärd: So, your actions paid off anyway by raising awareness.

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, absolutely.

Proscovia Svärd: Did any member of your group visit South Africa during the struggles?

Sunna Snaedal: No.

Proscovia Svärd: Where were you getting all the information from? Were you very active in watching media and consuming what was put out there or was it through the leaders of the group that you got feed-back on what was happening?

Sunna Snaedal: We for example got a paper called *The Militant* which is still published today and is based in London. This paper has alternative news compared to the Reuters and AP through which the rest of Western World gets its news. There would be some more detailed articles on South Africa. I can't say there were leaders in the group but I think the couple that I mentioned earlier, who were older than us in some way organized us.

Proscovia Svärd: Was *The Militant* newspaper channeled through a particular member of the group or was it different subscribers that had access to it? Could you have accessed it through your friend Sigthrudur who used to live in London and was actively involved in the struggles?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, it could be the case but I don't remember. I guess that the Iceland/Palestine Group also had some contacts with it.

Proscovia Svärd: Was there any organized help that was extended to the Southern African people? In Sweden for example, people gathered clothes and the equipment that they thought would help the struggles.

Sunna Snaedal: It might have been through the Red Cross but I am not aware.

Proscovia Svärd: What about the funding?

Sunna Snaedal: We had a list of people, companies and groups that would pay money once a month of about 200 – 300 Icelandic kroner to enable us to buy office materials and to organize meetings.

Proscovia Svärd: So, no money was collected to be sent to any particular group down in Southern Africa?

Sunna Snaedal: No, if I remember correctly it was for our own activities. It sounds a little bit selfish now when I think about it.

Proscovia Svärd. But you had to work any way in order to engage and needed office equipment.

Sunna Snaedal: At least it was not to pay ourselves of course.

Proscovia Svärd: But to carry out the activities.

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, to print pamphlets and things like that.

Proscovia Svärd: You also had a magazine called SAGA. Do you remember it? Our project has scanned it and made it available on the Internet on the Icelandic website.

Sunna Snaedal: May be that that magazine was published in connection with this big concert that was held. That was really before I got involved so much. I remember that Sigthrudur in her interview talked about this big concert but I do not remember being so engaged in it.

Proscovia Svärd: Were the actions that were being organized in any way secretive?

Sunna Snaedal: We were very open and talked about it all the time.

Proscovia Svärd: What were the highlights of your involvement in the liberation struggles?

Sunna Snaedal: I think it was being part of the struggle and the feeling of having done something about it. The release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the end of apartheid in South Africa was also a highlight. It was huge because in some way, one at least felt a little bit part of it. I realized it wasn't much but it was a very good feeling to have been part of it.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you have any plans to travel to South Africa or have you been to any other African countries?

Sunna Snaedal: No, I haven't. I have no immediate plans but for sure some day.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think your support or involvement meant for the people in Southern Africa?

Sunna Snaedal: I think probably if people in South Africa knew, (which they must have known) that all around the world there were groups trying to make governments aware of this problem, it must have meant something. But, I can't say that they knew about this little group on Iceland, (not to diminish it in any way), but we were young and we were not that extremely organized. It was a few of us doing this but I guess on the whole, to know that other people in a country far away care makes a difference.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think was the impact of your involvement?

Sunna Snaedal: I think it raised awareness in some way about apartheid and what was going on in South Africa. It makes an impression on people, if they see that one cares about people in other countries as well. If you talk about solidarity without focusing on what is going on inside your own country, you raise awareness that people in other countries do not have the same rights that we take for granted. I think that is the main point. I remember older people thought it was really unnecessary and I even remember my grandmother saying, "why do you do this?" She thought it was embarrassing that we were in the newspapers and she would say, "there so much suffering all over the world, why do you have to talk about this?" But the young and middle aged people were more open and thought that one needs to think about the whole world and not just Iceland. But my other grandmother who was a Communist was proud that we were taking part in this.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think solidarity means today and do you see the same engagement as the one you saw during your times as a young person?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes. I think so.

Proscovia Svärd: Global challenges and problems still exist like what is happening in Palestine, the challenges that are facing Africa both politically but as far as health and trade issues are concerned. Do you think people still have the same kind of engagement?

Sunna Snaedal: I think there are as many people showing solidarity and trying to make changes in the world today as there were at that time but unfortunately, there are as many people that are not and who may be rule the distribution of wealth in the world. But of course the challenges vary and the media has a crucial role to play in the Western world especially as regards to what parts of the world are made interesting and hence getting young people involved in something. Now Palestine is really hot but there are things happening in other parts of the world that are never discussed. So, I think this is a huge responsibility for the media because; one can't get involved in something one never hears about. I therefore think that solidarity means the same thing but it hasn't spread like it should have.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you think that the young people of today are equally as engaged as your generation was?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, I think so even though I don't have any statistics.

Proscovia Svärd: What has Africa meant for the people of Iceland?

Sunna Snaedal: Well that was a big question. I think unfortunately the people of Iceland have little information on Africa and a rather one sided view of Africa.

Proscovia Svärd: Why is this?

Sunna Snaedal: Because the reports one gets on Africa at least in Iceland are mainly on war and hunger and not much on development.

Proscovia Svärd: So here the media playing a negative role?

Sunna Snaedal: Absolutely, but I think it has become better especially when you go back to the engagement. May be in some way, there is more engagement by sending money through the Red Cross, which was not heard of in Iceland 30 years ago like today. Organizations have grown stronger and more organized and that is probably the most common connection to Africa.

Proscovia Svärd: Through the Red Cross?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes or something like that.

Proscovia Svärd: Does Iceland have development projects in different parts of Africa?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, of course in Mozambique, Angola and Malawi, especially education in fishing which is based on the knowledge that the Icelandic people have.

Proscovia Svärd: The reason as to why I am conducting these interviews is because when I travelled to Iceland in October, 2008, I failed to trace any particular place with documentation on all these activities that you have mentioned. I think it is a pity because as far as the other Nordic countries are concerned, archival lists with details of contact addresses of institutions and individuals have been made available via the Project website. Do you think this is important work?

Sunna Snaedal: Yes, because it shows that there was engagement and that is important for people to know. May be it would give a little inspiration to other people and make them aware that even if one lives in an isolated country like Iceland, one can still care about happenings in other parts of the world. It is only positive and it raises awareness.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you think this kind of documentation could contribute to education of the people of Iceland?

Sunna Snaedal. Yes, absolutely.

Proscovia Svärd: Thank you so much Sunna for taking your time to travel to Stockholm on this snowy and cold day to come and meet here in Klara Kyrkan in Stockholm 22 January, 2009.