Interview with Lóa Bjarnardóttir, former activist and a professional photographer currently working at a kindergarden in Iceland.

Held by Sigga Baldursdóttir who is a Ph D student at the University of Iceland on the 2nd of March 2009

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How were you involved in the liberation struggles in Southern Africa?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: To start with, I worked with an organisation in London called “The City of London Apartheid Group”, where I got to know about the struggles. That was in the summer of 1988, and when I got back to Iceland I got involved with SAGA.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How old were you at that time?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I was 16, turning 17.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How was your engagement with SAGA?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: SAGA was founded the summer when I came back to Iceland and I was quite glad that it existed so that I could continue working. We were a few girls and boys from the same school who joined SAGA, and very soon basically took over. We got involved in the leadership and in the whole organisation, and probably brought some fresh ideas. We also founded a singing group because we had gotten to know one such group in London. We learned the lyrics from the recorded tapes and organised singing trips around Reykjavik and stuff like that.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: So it was South African songs that you were singing?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Yes.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Do you know if there were any youth organisations that were engaged in the liberations struggles?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Not necessarily on South Africa, it was just SAGA. I think we were the youngest people then when we joined in 1988, but there were adults that founded the organisation and people from different political groups or political parties that were supporters and among the founders. There were also some famous people like musicians that took part in the founding of the organisation. But no, there was no separate group for the youth; all people of different ages were working together.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: For how long were you involved?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: From 1988 until the end.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: And when was that?
Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well really, when apartheid was abolished it just died out. I cannot remember exactly when we formally closed the office. We had a really nice office at Klapparstigur, which was actually hard to keep running, so we closed it because we could not afford it. The last year we worked from some other offices that we were allowed to meet in. Another organisation that I do not remember leant us their facilities to hold weekly meetings, etc.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How did you finance the housing before that?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: We financed the housing through the selling of literature, membership fees, and also through singing activities. We also received donations. It was pretty hard work but when I think back it was so much fun and so educational, a great experience.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: So what was your role in SAGA?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I was just a very active member to start with and at some point I became the chairman and I think I was the last one, but I cannot remember. I was very active then and we were probably ten people that just kept on. This was basically the only thing we did for a few years. But it was great to have been able to take part in this.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Did you engage with any international solidarity group?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well the ANC, yes. That was officially the only group or political party that SAGA supported. We had a lot of visits from ANC representatives in the Nordic countries, so we interacted at least with the ANC, but I do not think there were any other political parties. But do you mean African ones or Icelandic ones?

Sigga Baldursdóttir: International ones, yes.

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: No, that was the only one. It was officially our policy not to support any other organisations like PAC apart from the ANC.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: And how did you interact with them?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: We had contact with the Nordic branch of the ANC because we got quite a few visits from them. There was some communication between us.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: And what did they do during these visits?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well, mainly to see what we were doing and friendly visits. They took part in what we did, came to meetings, gave speeches, and we organised big meetings. Twice we organised concerts at Hotel Borg. The first one was a huge success, and was organised together with the “Cuba-Iceland Society.” It was like a friend-organisation here. The meeting started off with a meeting and ended with a concert with the Cuban band and Bubbi Mortens, one of Iceland’s most famous troubadours played. It was a big success and so, it was things like that we organised when we had visits of the ANC representatives.
Sometimes we just organized a good meeting because the facility we rented at Klapparstigur was very good one and relatively big.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Did you have any direct contact with the ANC in South Africa?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: No, not that I can recall. I do not know, maybe in the beginning when they were founding the organisation which was before my time. But we had pretty close contact with an ANC representative who lived in Sweden. But otherwise, no, I do not think so. We received all kinds of news about some youth convention that was to be held by the ANC, and I think all of us wanted to go but it did not happen.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: When was this?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: This must have been in 1989 or maybe 1990 but not directly.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: So what type of actions did you organise to make your voices heard?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: As I said we did many different things. We sold things and also organised educational materials. We usually had a television that played videos from South Africa, and we sang. We also went downtown with leaflets and flyers that we handed out to people. We held regular meetings and reading sessions, where we read literature on South Africa and then met up and discussed it. I mentioned the concerts as well – and this is just during a period of three years, I think. But I remember that many of our members wrote articles in papers, and because we were fighting for a boycott on South Africa, we went into supermarkets and put stickers on South African products. Sigthrudur Gunnarsdóttir and I brought along to Iceland, a lot of things that we had learnt in England.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How did the people react?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: In the supermarkets? Well we got thrown out. But what we did a lot was to fill a trolley with South African products and go to the till and put it on the conveyer belt and then just leave it there. We had some stickers as well, and of course it was not popular.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How did the general public react when you sang songs and carried out your other activities?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well, there were always people who did not want to hear about it and did not want to know what apartheid was. We therefore got many extreme reactions, like people saying “It should be like that!” I mean, the odd person was pro-apartheid, but I think that was from pure ignorance, if they really had looked into the matter they would not have said so because, why would some Icelandic people support that kind of system? I think people reacted positively generally, and when we showed the videos, some people got like “that is too much information, it is disgusting - we do not want to see this!” I cannot remember where we got these videos, but it was like a news documentary video with horrendous photographs and some clips on the situation in South Africa.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Do you still have them?
Lóa Bjarnardóttir: No, I have thrown away everything. We might have gotten the videos from England, from the group that I and Sigthrudur Gunnarsdóttir worked with. It was a pretty amazing group that supported many different political groups in Africa so we did not use all the materials while working for SAGA because its policy was just ANC. So we did not think that was right, although we probably stole some ideas from the London group, like the singing group which was a harmless and peaceful demonstration and really nice actually, pretty nice songs.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: So how did the media help you in your struggles?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well the newspapers would publish our articles, and I remember the singing group got aired once, before they showed the Cry Freedom movie, they interviewed us and we sang, which was a good advertisement for us. I cannot remember if there was anything around this first concert of ours on the television, probably in the news.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: What about the Cuban band?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Yes, that was a big success, a really good evening. We for example raised quite a lot of money. As I understood it there was this very big and fancy concert that was held here by SAGA to celebrate Nelson Mandela’s birthday in the summer of 1988. But it did not turn out well financially, so the organisation was bled for a long time after that, and that was what we walked into. But we managed to pay off everything. That was quite a good school for us to take over something like that because we were quite young.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Did the media publish any articles that had to do with your activities or did they not?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Yes they did but also at times they refused. This one particular time was when Ottó Másson wrote an article which was quite long and harsh and they refused to publish it. We mainly wrote in the Morgunblaðið, which on some occasions refused to publish the articles. Morgunblaðið was actually a conservative paper.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Did any of you ever visit Southern Africa during your involvement?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Not that I know of, I do not think so.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Was there any organised help that was extended to the people of Southern Africa in the form of clothes or money?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: No, maybe because we had walked into this debt that SAGA had by the time we joined and were struggling to keep the facility going. It was probably because of that, so no, we never extended any such help. It is sad because we managed to gather money, but we had a loan that we had to pay off. It was not typical for our organisation but maybe a typical Icelandic mistake.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Do you know if they did it on earlier occasions?
Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I do not know because I understand that they organised this concert celebrating Nelson Mandela’s birthday and SAGA was formed just weeks prior to this, and I think all their efforts went into concert arrangements so, I doubt it. But it was a really nice thing to do, there were concerts all over the world like in London, etc., but it was done in a bit of a silly way and I think that is why we were a bit tight with doing things like aid or similar. We tried to raise awareness about the situation.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: The actions that you organised, were they open or secret?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well, the supermarket ones were organised like military ones, but the reading groups or meetings and so on were always advertised and open to everybody. And we actually got quite good attendance to meetings which were in some educational form. We used opportunities when something was happening downtown and went out and sang. I remember we went to the police to get a licence to sing, because you can’t sing in public without a licence. So we did a lot of singing and it was a good way to get attention; it was quite different, there was nothing like that going on before and they were nice songs and in a different language. We even had a couple of kids with us, the little brother of Sunna Snaedal and Drifa Snaedal. We also went quite a lot to high schools and colleges; we really battled ourselves into anything that was happening. The “menntasköli” translated as a college or gymnasium has an open house every year and everybody is welcome to visit and attend lectures etc. Organisations are also welcome with their educational materials and they introduce work to students and guests and so, we did a lot of that. We were always welcomed at the more liberal colleges where we would have a stand with our literatures, show films on South Africa etc.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Did you have many people in SAGA?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well, maybe 20 people who were really active, but all in all it was a huge group – it counted a lot of members that joined before we came in, hundreds. But they would stop paying their fees and I remember calling people to collect annual fees. Because of the debt that was one of the things that we had to do, and I guess that was also how we paid the rent. But it was a really nice office and we did use it a lot for educational purposes and meetings. So it was a large organisation, but only 20-30 people were active and 10-15 who were really active, and that was the chairperson and the committee.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: So, what would you say were the highlights of your involvement in the struggle?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I think organising this first concert and taking part in it was a big highlight. It was just great from the beginning to end, but that was probably the main highlight.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: Do you know if the Icelandic government co-operated with other Nordic countries in support of the liberation struggles?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I do not really remember.
Sigga Baldursdóttir: Were there any other organisation that you worked with in for example Namibia or Zimbabwe?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: No, only the ANC.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: What do you think your support meant to the people of Southern Africa.

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I think it must have meant a great deal, and that it paid off. I hope they knew, or at least that afterwards they did, that there were people all over the world that were willing to fight against this horrible apartheid.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: How did your involvement impact the Icelandic people?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Well, I am sure that we woke some people up. That is the main thing that we were able to do, to get people to say no.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: You think they became more aware of the struggles as you supplied information?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Yes, exactly, I would say so.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: What do you think solidarity means today? Is there a difference?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: No, I should think it has the same meaning, although I am completely out of politics now. There are other areas that need support now, so yes, I hope it is still the same.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: And what is solidarity to you?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: Just to be compassionate, not selfish and open-minded and stick with supporting people.

Sigga Baldursdóttir: What do you think Africa has meant to the people of Iceland?

Lóa Bjarnardóttir: I think as a nation we are quite open-minded and educated and very interested in other cultures. When a foreigner comes here people ask where they come from, they want to know, so I think generally Icelanders are interested in what is happening in Africa. I think it is an interesting and huge continent with many different cultures.