Interview with Ottó Másson, Reykjavik, February 24th, 2009.

Prosocvia Svärd: I am here to try and capture the stories of the people who were involved in the activities that took place on Iceland during the liberation struggles in Southern Africa. Can you kindly tell me where the documentation on the activities that were carried out could be found because you mentioned that you had lots of archives but you do not remember where they might be?

Ottó Másson: Yes, for a time the documents were just kept in my home, and it became too much for us to keep at the time, so we had to find another place to keep it. Now it has been a while, and I just cannot remember at the moment where the documents are, but it was all the internal documents and other things.

Prosocvia Svärd: Which organisation was it that you were operating under? Were you a member of SAGA?

Ottó Másson: Yes.

Prosocvia Svärd: What role did you play in SAGA?

Ottó Másson: Well, SAGA was founded in 1988 and there was a series of public meetings, and eventually a founding convention that was held in 1988. And I was there and I attended most of the public meetings before it was established. So, I was a founding member but I was not really active then until later. There was a group of people who were active during the first period of the group’s lifespan.

Prosocvia Svärd: Do you remember any names?

Ottó Másson: Oh yes, one of them was Kristinn Halldór Einarsson and a few others. They were extremely active and the group was quite large when it was founded. It was an activist organisation basically and so people would be active for some time and then drop out, and then others would be active instead etc. The thing with the South Africa group was that there was this nucleus of people who were really active during the first period, and they organised a huge concert which (if I remember correctly) was held in 1989 on Miklatún. The concert was entitled “Free Nelson Mandela!”, and many people participated, so it was quite a feat to organise. Some difficulties came up within the group itself afterwards, and I think it was quite exhausting to organise.

Prosocvia Svärd: Did the organisation of the concert cause any conflicts within the group?

Ottó Másson: In the end, yes but..

Prosocvia Svärd: Did that lead to a split within the group?

Ottó Másson: Not really a split. You see, what happened was that the group of people who initially organised the concert and were most active got both exhausted and in a financial mess, and they basically fled the group. In the autumn of 1989 new people gradually took over the running of the group. And that was when I really became active, in October 1989 or something like that. It was a bit difficult because we had to deal with debts and other things that were left from the earlier period, but at the same time, the struggle itself was escalating.
But we did what we could. I was not a member of the steering committee, but I was very active. I wrote articles in newspapers and I was interviewed as a representative of the organisation, and so forth.

Proscovia Svärd: And these articles are part of the archives you made reference to?

Ottó Másson: I actually do have the articles I wrote myself, I did keep copies of them.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you think I can access them if we keep in touch via e-mail?

Ottó Másson: If I could scan them I could send you digital copies; they are in Icelandic of course, but yes.

Proscovia Svärd: That would be great! But tell me, what motivated your engagement, how old were you then?

Ottó Másson: I was 24 when I became really active, which as I said earlier was in the autumn of 1989. In the coming period I was probably one of a few people who were nearly always at the Organisation and doing something, although I did not want to become part of the steering committee and I never did. Basically the steering committee was composed of, well the biggest part of the group back then were girls around 18 to 20, and they were mostly responsible for the leadership of the group. Drifa Snaedal was one of them, her sister Sunna Snaedal was another, Sigga, Judy, and my ex-wife Loá Bjarnadóttir.

Proscovia Svärd: Gylfi Páll Hersir showed me some correspondence that Sunna Snaedal who was far younger than him had signed as the chairman. I found it interesting that the younger people were in the leadership of the organisation. Why was this?

Ottó Másson: The group had to be saved, basically. It had almost fallen apart because the others had simply left. There were debts that had to be paid and it was still important to continue the struggle, and the only way to achieve that was to have the group of people who were really active within the organisation lead it. And that is what happened. Gylfi could have done it, maybe, but I think he was busy with other things.

Proscovia Svärd: You mean the youth were more active than the people who were older within the group?

Ottó Másson: There were not a whole lot of older people left; that was the thing. It was simply a way of representing those who were really active at the time. It would have been pointless to have people on the steering committee who were really not a part of the real activist kernel.

Proscovia Svärd: I do not remember if you ever told me what motivated your engagement.

Ottó Másson: I did know what apartheid was and I had read about it, because I had been politically active for years prior to that. But at the time I had not been politically active for a little while and only decided to become so in the autumn of 1989. I just thought that apartheid was a totally despicable, disgusting system, and that was what motivated me really. Some of the things were just unbelievable, so I wanted to do my little bit.

Proscovia Svärd: For how long were you involved?
Ottó Másson: Until the group basically disbanded.

Proscovia Svärd: And when was this?

Ottó Másson: It was quite active for about a year and a half after I had become active and we were all over the place, demonstrating.

Proscovia Svärd: You mean within Iceland?

Ottó Másson: Yes, we were very active and we had visits from representatives of the ANC, one of them (whose name I cannot remember) stayed at my place, and that was in early 1991. I think basically the group disbanded in 1992. The last few months of the organisation were quite weak – we had managed to resolve the crisis, organised a lot of activities, and many people in Iceland were certainly aware of the issues of South Africa as a result of what we did. The media did not report a lot on apartheid as they should have done. The main paper here, Morgunblaðið was basically telling a side of the story that was more acceptable to the apartheid government I would say. They did publish some articles from us, however, if reluctantly.

Proscovia Svärd: Why was this?

Ottó Másson: Well, if you go back and read in Newsweek and publications like that, you would get a pretty similar picture that tried to depict the then current government in South Africa as intent on dismantling Apartheid even without being pressurized to do so, and Inkatha as basically a freedom organisation and nothing else. So we had to try to make people aware of what the reality was by ourselves, and that was why it was important to write our articles, etc.

Proscovia Svärd: But what newspapers published your articles?

Ottó Másson: There was this daily newspaper called Pjödviljinn at the time and which no longer published. It was mainly sympathetic to our cause and it was not nearly as big as Morgunblaðið, but it was sympathetic. I remember I went there and they carried out an interview with me as a representative of the organisation and that they were interested in getting our points across.

Proscovia Svärd: But I understand that the media was politically aligned, would that explain why Morgunblaðið was not interested?

Ottó Másson: It was definitely a right-wing paper, and they perceived the democratic overturn of the apartheid regime as threatening in some way.

Proscovia Svärd: But why was your government was so conservative and why did it have such an attitude towards something that was so despicable like the apartheid system?

Ottó Másson: There was a law on the boycotting of South African products, but retailers were obviously bypassing it, and I think most politicians here were not really interested in the issue.
Some of the more left-wing people in parliament supported it but I am not so sure that many of the politicians were aware of these issues or the scale of the injustices.

Proscovia Svärd: But they ought to have known having been on the international scene? The people I have interviewed earlier have mentioned the fact that Iceland looked more to the US, and Britain and because of that could not take a more active stand. Do you agree to that?

Ottó Másson: I should add one thing. It is quite a traditional thing for the Icelandic foreign policy to follow that of the US.

Proscovia Svärd: Even now, after the integration of the Nordic countries into the European Union?

Ottó Másson: Yes, Iceland has always been following in the wake of the US. You can see that from the incredible reluctance at some crucial points to condemn Israeli actions, for example. If you compare this with other European countries, it is obvious.

Proscovia Svärd: You mentioned that you went all over Iceland, trying to create awareness. Can you elaborate your statement?

Ottó Másson: We were mostly just in Reykjavik. We wanted to have activities in other places as well but those were very few. So the group was basically concentrated Reykjavik. I think there was a group in Akureyri, which is in the Northern part, but I do not really know a lot about them because that was before my time.

Proscovia Svärd: What were the activities that you were engaged in?

Ottó Másson: We demonstrated and we went downtown with placards, sold badges and distributed leaflets; explained what was happening in South Africa and that we should boycott South African products. We did a lot of work on that and tried to make people aware that the ANC encouraged people to boycott South African products so as to put pressure on the regime. For quite some time there was something that went on every week.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you ever have any direct contact with the ANC? You mentioned that at some time a representative of the ANC came and spent some days at your place?

Ottó Másson: Yes, but that was in early 1991 or perhaps in late 1990; I would really have to consult the archives. But there was contact, a few times actually. They had noticed that we were doing a lot of work, so they came over here.

Proscovia Svärd: Did they come here as a result of the collaboration you had with the rest of the Nordic countries or did you have direct contact with them in Southern Africa?

Ottó Másson: It was through the other Nordic countries.

Proscovia Svärd: Did any of the members of your group visit Southern Africa during this time?

Ottó Másson: There were plans to do so but in the end they did not materialise. Obviously it was a big thing and most of us were very young. We did not have a lot of money nor did the organisation. So it was something hard to do. There were some conflicts because some people
really wanted to go pretty badly but, I do not think it was a realistic thing to do at the time – so there were some conflicts around that. But in the end, it just could not be done; people did not have the money to go, so that never happened.

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

Ottó Másson: Well looking back it was probably the articles. I wrote what was probably one of the biggest articles that were published at the time in the dailies; it was a whole page in Morgunblaðið – the right-wing paper!

Proscovia Svärd: So you had managed to turn it over to your side?

Ottó Másson: Oh no! But they did publish it, and it was definitely noticed and people tried to contact me afterwards. If they had tried to say anything afterwards, I would have written again and that would not have been appreciated.

Proscovia Svärd: So those were the highlights of your involvement?

Ottó Másson: Yes, probably, on looking back. But there was a lot of work that at the time was just as important, for instance the fight for the effectiveness of the boycott. I, like everybody else in the group at the time put a lot of work into that; Drifa, Sunna, Sigga, Gylfi and Lóa, and the rest of the group.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you know if the Icelandic government ever cooperated with the rest of the Nordic countries in support of the liberation movement?

Ottó Másson: I cannot really remember details about that but the government as far as I can remember really did not do anything at all that was useful. There were some trade unions that tended to support the cause. We tried our best to contact them and to get more financial support for one thing because we definitely needed that when we took over the group. Some of them gave us support and when the representatives of the ANC came here they would talk to various people. I did not follow them around though because I did not have a car at the time. Gylfi probably knows a lot more about that, about who exactly they spoke to. I cannot remember.

Proscovia Svärd: Did you ever have any collaboration with the ANC youth organisations in South Africa, or were there other organisations you worked with in Namibia or Zimbabwe?

Ottó Másson: It was the ANC representatives in Scandinavia that we were in contact with. We did not have direct contact with South Africa or the other countries. But some of us certainly did follow what was going on in Namibia and elsewhere.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think this support meant to the people of Southern Africa?

Ottó Másson: Well, maybe not a whole lot in the end but I think what matters is basically that everything counts. And that was how we saw it. It was important to put pressure on the apartheid regime, and we did our bit. If somebody took the time to notice, they must have seen that in all the Scandinavian countries and even in little Iceland, people were working on the issue and cared.
Proscovia Svärd: The fact that a small country like Iceland with a very conservative government had people who stood up against it and sympathised with Southern Africa through collaboration with other solidarity groups, makes the documentation of your involvement even more important. The histories of the other countries are now written, so I do hope that the activists here will have to find some way of gathering all the documentation on their activities and deposit them at the National archives as a collective memory. Even if it means making photocopies, having it in a particular place as a point of reference would be a very important initiative.

Ottó Másson: I will ask around, definitely and try to locate these documents. They should be somewhere but it has just been a long time and we could definitely not keep it, and I cannot remember where it wound up in the end.

Proscovia Svärd: What do you think solidarity means today?

Ottó Másson: Well, I am not politically active at the moment apart from what has been happening in the country and I obviously have my opinions like anyone else and I have been demonstrating. But I would probably say the role of the Israeli government in the Middle East. That is probably one of the most important.

Proscovia Svärd: Do you think there is the same kind of engagement in that issue as it was during the time of apartheid?

Ottó Másson: Not in this country, no. There are people who have been struggling for that issue for a long time, but it has never really taken off the ground in the same manner as in the case of the fight against apartheid.

Proscovia Svärd: Why is this?

Ottó Másson: I do not know. Maybe we felt that the struggle at the time within South Africa itself had escalated and that it had perhaps become a realistic prospect that Nelson Mandela would be a free man, and that the apartheid regime would be dismantled, and the ANC would be free to act in public as a political party, and so on and so forth. Maybe we just felt that this would happen.

Proscovia Svärd: Having said that, do you mean that this kind of hope - as far as the Palestinian issue is concerned - does not exist today?

Ottó Másson: It is a different situation in that the Israeli State is very much reliant on US aid and support. And they still get it – even now, the new president of the US is willing to continue that support which I think is extremely disappointing, to say the least! That does not seem to change, but it is very important certainly for that whole world.

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

Ottó Másson: Africa? I do not think there is a lot of contact between Icelanders and Africa. The media does not give a lot of coverage on current events in Africa and perhaps more importantly, they do not give a lot of in-depth news analysis. You know, reading a little bit of news about something that has just happened, does not tell you a whole lot when you do not
know who it is you are reading about, what party he/she belongs to - when you basically do not know what you are reading about! And that is the crux of the matter because we do not get a lot of information here on Africa in Icelandic. Some of us did put out a pamphlet in the same year that the organisation was founded in 1988. I did not contribute to that myself, it was made by a group of people who saw themselves as communists but it was useful.

Proscovia Svärd: Thank you so much.