1994

I Speak as a Woman Person: Geoffrey Davis Interviews Emma Mashinini

Geoffrey Davis

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi

Recommended Citation
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol16/iss1/102

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Abstract

Emma, let me begin by saying what a great privilege it is for me to meet you here in Geneva. Having read your book Strikes have followed me all my life1 one cannot but be excited at the opportunity to talk to someone who has experienced in her own life so much of what it has meant to be a South African during the 4tauies of apartheid and who has been so consistently involved in the struggle to bring about change. You lived in Sophiatown before it was demolished, you were Ill the Congress of the People where the Freedom Charter was passed, you have been associated with so many of those who carried forward the freedom struggle over the years, some of whom gave their lives for it, like David Webster and Neil Aggett. Above all, you have devoted much of your life to the Trade Union movement which pioneered fundamental change inside the country, and now- at last - you are experiencing the transition to a post-apartheid society. I should therefore like to talk to you about the whole course of your career, focusing specifically on women's issues and ending with some questions about where you see yourself and the country in these momentous times.
Emma Mashinini was born in Johannesburg. She began her career as a factory worker before founding the Catering and Commercial Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA) in 1975. In 1986 she became Director of the Division of Justice and Reconciliation for the Church of the Province of Southern Africa. She is currently Deputy Chairperson of the National Manpower Commission. Emma Mashinini is the author of *Strikes have followed me all my life* (The Women's Press, 1989) and has won numerous awards for her activities on behalf of the trade union movement.
I Speak as a Woman Person: Geoffrey Davis
Interviews Emma Mashinini

Emma, let me begin by saying what a great privilege it is for me to meet you here in Geneva. Having read your book Strikes have followed me all my life, one cannot but be excited at the opportunity to talk to someone who has experienced in her own life so much of what it has meant to be a South African during the decades of apartheid and who has been so consistently involved in the struggle to bring about change. You lived in Sophiatown before it was demolished, you were at the Congress of the People where the Freedom Charter was passed, you have been associated with so many of those who carried forward the freedom struggle over the years, some of whom gave their lives for it, like David Webster and Neil Aggett. Above all, you have devoted much of your life to the Trade Union movement which pioneered fundamental change inside the country, and now—at last—you are experiencing the transition to a post-apartheid society. I should therefore like to talk to you about the whole course of your career, focusing specifically on women’s issues and ending with some questions about where you see yourself and the country in these momentous times.

I’d like to begin with your earlier career, because for someone from outside the country it would be fascinating to learn something about Sophiatown. So many people have written about that legendary place—Don Mattera, Can Themba, Trevor Huddleston among others—and, of course, there was the Junction Avenue Theatre Company’s highly successful show at the Market Theatre. How do you see Sophiatown looking back at it now? Do you think it has been over-romanticised perhaps?

I don’t think it is over-romanticised at all. It was so wonderful when we had Trevor Huddleston, who had come to South Africa and had gone back to Sophiatown. I wasn’t in his company, but I saw it on telly, especially when he went to visit a home, which is called St. Joseph’s Home for Children, who are deserted by their parents. As they drove to that centre, they drove past my home, because it was in Toby Street. So these memories always come back. I’ve only been to Sophiatown once. I had also visited that home, because it happened to be an Anglican home for children who needed care. What really touches you is that certain things may have changed, but the layout of Sophiatown is still Sophiatown and the names of the streets are still the same names which were there. The first street was Toby Street, the next one was Bertha Street, then
Gerty Street, and so on. So it’s those memories which we can never forget in this government of national unity and reconciliation. Sophiatown will always be our home.

Another of your memories of the South Africa of the 1950s must be the Congress of the People in 1955 which, of course, is one of the great dates in the history of the liberation struggle before the political movements involved like the ANC were actually banned – and you were there?

I was there in Kliptown. I was still a young woman who was still having babies. I’m sure I would have got prizes for bringing children into the world! I had one in the back and one here, and was expectant of another one, but I was there in that wonderful congress. And not so long ago during these very sad times of our country, there was a train massacre which had happened in Kliptown. And afterwards, as after the congress, we took a train with all our bishops from the church just to give solidarity to their people. And it was very interesting when I said to the people: This is where the congress was, in Kliptown. It seemed as though it was something very new for many of them to know that square was where the People’s Congress was. Now it’s like a flea-market, they sell everything there, vegetables, chickens, it’s a very busy square now, the People’s Congress Square.

In your book you trace your own politicisation back to that period of your life.

Yes, my life changed, because I sat there, and I was listening to all the speakers. And, you know, it came back to me to say: why am I in this congested township? Kliptown itself was a slum. It was a real slum. And only then did I get the exposure of saying, why am I in a slum and other people are not in slums? So this is how you get this thing. No one tells you, your situation around you just tells you that: Hey, you’d better get up and do something.

While we are talking about your early political development, I also want to ask you about the Black Consciousness Movement. In your book you talk a lot in terms of human dignity, identity, black identity. Would it be true to describe your own development as moving from a predominantly black consciousness notion of recapturing black identity towards the present phase of non-racialism, that you celebrate in your contribution to a Book of Hope?

Definitely, one can never run down anything about Black Consciousness. I think Black Consciousness made us, and we must always be conscious that we are black. We can speak of non-racialism, but for the development of the black person – that I will always stand up for, because we need to find that equality with other people as black persons. Most of our leaders
today came from the Black Consciousness movement, especially when they were still students at the university during the time of Steve Biko. That did not mean exclusion of other people, but it just said: Black man, black person, black woman, wake up, stand up for yourselves, and know who you are. That I still live for. And this is where it comes in now. Our ministers are mainly black, and you cannot be dependent, you’ve got to be self-sufficient as a black person.

I feel that the values of which you are speaking were perhaps those which informed your early trade union activity, too. Is was in the mid-70s, wasn’t it, when you became a union organizer?

Yes. Many people misunderstood me and it did not make me very popular in certain quarters. But I was fighting to say that we need to be self-sufficient. If I ever forgot that I was black, I would have been so dependant of other people and never have made my own way through. This is what I did not want to be recognized in an umbrella of any other person, because I have my own human dignity, which I need to present.

And did you think that your activity in the trade union essentially changed that status of underling?

Yes, it did. It did in a number of ways, because we were one of the trade unions which said, we want to work side by side with the white trade unions, with the other trade unions, not to be a cut off them but to work on equal terms. We worked very peacefully and very wonderfully together.

In those days it wouldn’t have been possible to have been a member of a multi-racial trade union though, would it?

It would not. You could not have been, but you could have been what at the time they called a sister union, or something less than a sister union.

How did you first get interested and involved in the trade union movement yourself?

I was a garment worker and I became a shop steward. I stated in my first book that it was the time when black people were treated like slaves. You kept quiet until you could keep quiet no longer. And then the workers elected me to be their shop steward. That was my first involvement with the trade union.

How did you view your early collaboration with white trade-unionists like Morris Kagan of the National Union of Distributive Workers? They were instrumental in really getting you going. Rather like an early non-racialist practice, I suppose?
In fact I would say that. It was at meetings when I was a shop steward in the Garment Workers' Union that we met. Maybe I was a bit outspoken. This was a meeting where all the Morris Kagans were present. When there was a need for a black trade union in the commercial distributive trade, they must have connived among themselves to say, we think that woman would be the right person to come and start this union.

**What did you set out to achieve?**

That was not the first approach. I had been approached to work for other unions in other industries before. At that particular time I was holding quite a senior position in the garment industry and that slightly made me not want to leave, you know, and for no earthly reason. It wasn't even a paying thing, but it was the status. I've always pushed for status, to say I must be recognized for what I am and who I am. But when this approach came, I gave in and said, I think I will give it a go - and it worked out. Coming from the garment industry to the commercial distributive trade was very different. It was like night and day, and again it was Morris Kagan who really assisted me. It was like my university for the first time, because he gave me so many statutes, so many books, and said, read and if you don't understand, come and ask me. Luckily I came across someone who was almost like myself. He didn't say: If you can't do it I'll do it for you. He said: If you can't do it, come and ask me how to do it. That was a development. That's why I like him. So with my black consciousness you can say I owe much to working very closely with other people.

**Were you very much a lone woman organizer in the trade union movement? What role did you see for women in the movement at that time?**

You mean in the Garment Workers' Union? That was a women's union, and we had a leader who had kept the home fires burning in the trade union movement for a long time, Lucy Mvubelo, who was the General Secretary. There was Johanna Cornelius who was white, and Anna Scheepers and others, who were also working alongside this union. And the women were very vocal.

**When you founded the Catering and Commercial Allied Workers' Union of South Africa (CCAWLUSA) that was no longer solely a women's union, was it?**

No, it wasn't just a women's union. Neither was the Garment Workers Union just women, but the majority were. Then I moved into the Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union. The reason why we started this union was the shop workers; firstly there were no shop-assistants who were black because of job reservation. So I think the reason
why the white union saw the need that there must be a black union was
two ways: It is because they were undercutting them by employing many
black shop assistants who were paid at a lower rate than the white shop
assistants. So it was good to have them organized, to bring them in par
with the other shop workers, so that it should not just overpower the
other union.

What do you regard as the essential achievements of your union?

It really is such a pride to see that, firstly, I have been a human rights
pusher and not necessarily a women’s rights fighter in my life, but we
achieved so many things for women’s rights within the union itself. I
mean, just the maternity benefits which we achieved were extended from
the black union to the white workers, because we had achieved that. We
were not saying, whatever we have achieved is strictly for the black
workers; we said it was for the workers in that particular industry. And
that was very great. Even nursing of the babies after you have had your
maternity leave, time off to go and nurse your baby – that was very
important as well. And the working conditions for every other worker, be
it man or woman.

Was maternity leave something that white women workers could expect to be
granted for, say, a year and a black woman not? What was the situation?

Well, if the agreement did not extend to cover them, we don’t know what
they would have done, but you know they have been so complacent that
I don’t think they would have reacted. It would have been some talking
which was going to happen, but they would not have reacted as we
would have reacted. It had to be the other way round.

One thing which impresses me about Strikes have followed me all my life was
not least that marvellous picture of yourself and your friend Joyce Seroke
confronting police and police-dogs during a demonstration protesting against the
conferring of the Freedom of Soweto on a government minister, Dr. Piet
Koornhof. How did you manage to overcome your initial anxiety at being arrested
for your trade union activities?

Those were the days when you really had to do something for your
people, you know, for yourselves. We just did not have to give in to all
those threats about policemen coming to our townships, just because
someone is coming to be given the right of the township, when we are
suffering in the township – and then we are threatened with dogs. It was
very good that it happened. I didn’t even know there was someone taking
a picture of it which reached the whole world, and people started coming
up about what was happening in South Africa.
As we talk I'm going to come to a point to say: I am here representing the government now. And I still find it so difficult because I come from the resistance movement. And now I must speak in another language and I'm so used to fighting against that which is not right. So I would do it again.

Your own life history does reflect that astonishing transition black people have gone through in South Africa recently – from opposition to government – doesn't it?

Yes, definitely it has that. In fact when people were standing up to be parliamentarians it was not anything which would really have struck me to say I would stand up for. I thought I had done my work. It has come to the end of the road, let the other people go. But I want to say that I will always hero-worship the trade unions in South Africa because they have the greatest respect for history. I am here today representing government in the International Labour Organization. It is something that I would not have done had it not been for the trade unions.

Would you say that in a sense the trade unions functioned as a liberation movement inside the country at a time when the political organisations were banned and in exile?
Oh yes, definitely. It is the trade unions that played the leading role. I stated in my book that I am proud that I’ve worked for two organisations which have contributed very heavily for the liberation of South Africa. My present boss is Desmond Tutu, you know. Coming from the trade unions to the church, the work that I did in the church was in the department of human rights – and again it was nothing but fighting for the liberation of the people. The trade unions have made a great contribution to the liberation that we have today. We owe it to the trade unions.

But, of course, from the 1970s to the present the trade unions did themselves have a great struggle to gain recognition for black unions, didn’t they? I was wondering whether when you applied to register your union after the Wiehahn Commission of Inquiry’s report you didn’t feel that the Commission had in effect placed you in a somewhat compromising situation, where you were having virtually to comply with apartheid structures in order to finally get the unions off the ground?

In fact I was elected to be the spokesperson of the trade unions during the Wiehahn Commission, and in this position I’m holding now I meet with people who were part of the Wiehahn Commission, who remind me that when Wiehahn asked me, ‘Do you think trade unions need to be involved in politics?’ and I was very adamant to say: ‘Yes, Trade Unions have to be involved in politics’ they say now, ‘What do you think now? What should the situation be?’ They are hitting me back with what I said at the time. I see it’s different now, because now we have politicians back on the ground, but the trade unions will always keep a vigilant eye to see what is happening with the politicians.

That reminds me of what your present boss, Desmond Tutu, himself said about the church – that when the liberation movements were unbanned, he would go back to being a full-time churchman...

And he did in fact. He became very on the quiet side, but that does not mean that even if we have this government of the people in place, the church and the trade unions are going to take everything rosily. We must see the implementation of what they promised would happen. So we will still be a vigilant eye.

Yes, I’m very sure of that. Let me go on now to ask you about the setting up of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985, because, of course, that was a huge step forward for the trade union movement, wasn’t it? You were involved in that, weren’t you?

Yes, we were an independent union. There were three other unions that were independent, too. While there were two federations, we did not
belong to either of the two. So these independent unions came together and saw that here was a need to have one federation for the country. This is how the whole thing came about, we started unity talks which eventually gave birth to COSA.

The present situation of transition to a new society in South Africa must be changing the role of the trade unions in some senses. What do you see as essential challenges facing the trade union movement in the interim five-year period we have before us now?

Interestingly, as it is right now, we have two federations, COSATU and NACTU, the National Council of Trade Unions. They are working so closely together now that Jay Naidoo has gone to Parliament and Sam Shilowa has taken his place. On the other side, it is Cunningham Ngcukana, who is the General Secretary of NACTU. We've brought a very large team from South Africa to the ILO for the first time. I think there were about 12 trade unions, from the employers even more, and then about the same number from the government. Because the COSATU General Secretary was not available, the NACTU General Secretary is the leader of the trade unions. It does not matter which camp you come from. For me this is so significant that I am very certain that if they can start new unity talks we will end up with one federation for the country which will make us — I keep on saying us, and I'm supposed to be the government! — it should make them very powerful. I really hope it comes to that stage. The unions really haven't softened up because of having the government that we are having. They really are trade unions who are still very strong.

Do you see the trade unions fighting for worker's rights just as effectively as before, even with the new government, which will presumably be more sympathetic to their aims?

Yes, I think they will. I'm sure of that. They will even have more time to fight for worker rights on the shop floor, because they are not spread on politics and other things. So I think that in the world of work, management has got to be ready for even more powerful and stronger trade unions. They will need a bit of time of adjustment to the future role they must be playing. Once they have got to that, I think they will be very strong on collective bargaining, more than ever before. That heavy emphasis on liberation of the woman or liberation of the man; it was liberation of the nation. Now that we have achieved that, there has got to be a special focus on strengthening the recognition of women. The time has come that we should move even further from decision-making to power. Women must be seen to have power, women must see themselves and know they have power. They demonstrated this very clearly during
the elections. I think that women were the majority in the queues for voting. And we had the strongest vote as women. So that shows that woman have power.

**How strong is the representation of women in the present parliament, though?**

It's thirty three and a third percent. I believe that in the past South Africa was rated 130th in the world concerning the representation of women. We have now moved to the tenth place. The Speaker of the House is a woman, Frene Ginwala.

*She's an excellent choice.*

Yes. She was President of the Coalition of the Women. We are not very excited, but we have two Cabinet Ministers and three Deputy Cabinet Ministers. We haven't done very well in that position. Neither have we done well when it comes to the Premiers in the provincial legislatures. We have not done well there. But now we have thirty three and a third percent at a first go we must get ready for better things.

**It's a significant start, isn't it?**

Yes, a start.

Coming to your book now, I think for any reader certainly the most moving part of the work must be your account of your period in solitary confinement, and especially the psychological trauma in the aftermath of detention. I know you suffered very greatly from that experience, and so it seems almost impertinent to ask you about it. I would, however, just like to ask you very briefly what do you think it was that sustained you, that gave you the strength to cope with an ordeal which for those of us who've never had to go through it is almost impossible to imagine?

I really think that my sustenance comes from not sitting back, and going on, and on, and on, and on. And I want to thank my father for that. When I came out of prison I was badly tortured, as you know, and I was very exhausted. And he pushed me and said: 'You must go to work. Even if you can go to work just for a few months. So that the people who wanted to destroy you must not get credit of it. Go to work!' And I went to work, and from there I gathered my strength and I went on, and on, and on, and on.

When Anna Rutherford called me from Denmark, I think I would not have easily been excited or ready to make a call to any other country for someone I don't know. But because it was Denmark, I just thought I must call this person. Denmark for me is very important, because of the
treatment they gave me. So I just honour anything that comes that way in my life.

You went to the Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims in Denmark, didn't you?

Yes. It's run by Inge Genefke. She set up that clinic. I'd gone back to Denmark once on a church mission. I could not speak to her, but it was enlarged, it was a very big clinic from the time when was there in 1982. I think it did a lot of good service. I remember I was there with a huge number of people from Chile, at the time of their problems, and it really was very helpful. A nurse who used to work in that clinic has visited South Africa twice now and each time she comes, we meet and have dinner together. So it's been wonderful.

Good. How do you view the experience and its significance for you in your life, particularly in the context of your later work? I'm thinking especially of your work with the division of Justice and Reconciliation, set up by the Church of the Province of Southern Africa?

It has been very good in the sense that there are a lot of contributions which have been made by the church. You know that our church is part of the South African Council of Churches and there is a lot of work on justice and peace in South Africa. The peace accord comes initially from the churches who brought in business and the politicians. That was a contribution which has led us to where we are today, we had to fight all the injustices which were causing violence. The church was very much involved in all the crisis committees, in all the areas where there was a lot of violence. We had monitors coming from all over the world, coming via the church to be monitors or observers during the violence even before the voting time.

Maybe something which you do not know is that I am now holding a very senior position in what was called the National Manpower Commission. I am the Deputy Chair of that, even though my new minister does not like the word 'Manpower Commission.' Now it's going to be National Labour Commission, we are going to change the name. That has been a very significant position, and I was put into this position. Jay Naidoo called me at home and said: 'Emma, I'm in a meeting here with a number of unions. We just want to know: can you please agree that we nominate you to go and serve on this committee?' And I said: 'Jay, I don't know what that is, but because it is Labour and it is Trade Union, I'm ready to do it.' And I will learn as I go.

What are your duties in this new capacity?
In this new capacity we are making all the legislation, which is actually taken to the Cabinet before it goes to Parliament. In the world of work and especially the Industrial Relations Commission itself, they all come from the National Manpower Commission. And I am the Deputy Chairperson there.

Do you have a special responsibility for the rights of women in the work-place, for instance?

Yes, we do have an Equal Opportunities Committee, which is a subcommittee of our Human Resources Committee, and I am the Chairperson of Human Resources, and then comes the subcommittee and the equal opportunities fall within that. May I just elaborate?

Yes, please.

In fact I arrived here before the whole delegation, because there was a Women’s Forum, which took place from the 1st to the 3rd of June here in Geneva, and which also focused on women’s issues in the new era. That particular conference is going to come out with a document which is going to be presented at the Beijing World Conference of Women next year in 1995. So there is a lot which I learned out of this particular meeting like the migration of women. When we speak about migrant workers in South Africa, our focus is always thinking about men going to the mines. Yet there are so many migrant workers who are women, who have come to South Africa because they have followed their husbands and for a number of other reasons. There is not much legislation for the women, but there is for the men. So because we are receiving so many migrant workers, this has opened my eyes to see that we need to do a lot for the women when we go back.

The migrant labour system has existed in South Africa since the discovery of diamonds in the last century hasn’t it? The compound system has always prejudiced the situation of women. Do you see the change as bringing, shall we say, a restoration of family life with the dismantling, at least partially, of the migrant labour system in the new South Africa? Or is the migrant labour system going to carry on as it has before? There is a lot of talk about reorganising and reconstructing the single-sex hostels as family accommodation, isn’t there?

I think that just in a human way those things ought to have been done away with long time ago. We would not have had most of the problems that we are having in South Africa - when it come to violence - if we were having home and family life in order. The hostel, the compound system, the migrant worker system all have divided our families, and the government is going to do everything in their power to see that the single-
sex hostels are done away with. There is no responsibility that can come out of any kind of unity of that nature. I mean every home needs a head of a family, even though in South Africa you find that in most homes women are mainly the heads of the households. You need to be a family and you need to live as a unit.

I was very impressed by the theme of family solidarity running through your book. Your family were very supportive to you when you were in prison. And also in the Book of Hope, you place a very strong emphasis on the role of the family in society.

I was going to go on and talk about women’s issues in South Africa, but some of the suggestions I was going to put to you have already been answered by implication. I was going, for instance, to ask you whether you still felt that you were a token woman. You used the phrase in your book to describe your first moving into the labour movement, when you sometimes felt that you were a token woman in a male-dominated preserve.

Maybe it’s in my making, you know, that in many of those positions or in most of my involvement I find that I am surrounded by men. And when defining tokenism at one time with a friend I was feeling bad and said: ‘Why is it that I’m always about the only woman or before other women come in, once I get in there I make sure that other women come in?’ And she said: ‘How do you get there?’ Usually you are not nominated, you are elected to that position, so that takes away the tokenism, because you are elected to that position.

My position in the church is mainly working with bishops, you know, and when I came in the women themselves were not ordained to the priesthood. From my Department of Justice we saw that as an injustice.

It is indeed. It reminded me very much of reading about the situation in England, where, of course, the ordination of women has led to something of a division within the Church of England. Did you encounter a great deal of opposition on that issue in South Africa?

In fact we gave the lead, we got the ordination of women ahead of the Church of England, and we had about 90% support for that. Those who were not supportive of it did not react negatively. They had to work around it and but remained within the church. After we got it, the women in the Church of England kept saying: ‘If South Africa can get it, we are sure we shall get it.’ So it was South Africa that led the way.

Another issue which has always been very important in the lives of black women in South Africa has been the situation of domestic workers. I read that you had been involved in campaign towards the unionisation, the labour representation of domestic workers.
Yes, we are now having very strong unions, organizing the domestic workers to a point where that exploitation which used to be where one domestic worker would be a general worker and look after the children has been minimised quite a lot. It has created problems for either the domestic worker or the mother, because now the domestic workers are aware that they have got to work for so many hours. They are making more money because now they work part-time for this employer and part-time for that one. For the first time the other woman has to do some house chores as well! So it was development for both the women, the madam and the domestic worker. Yes, it was development for both of them.

Presumably the law that prohibited a domestic worker being accommodated in the house in which she was working has been abolished as well?

Yes, it has been abolished, but...

That doesn’t mean the practice has been abolished.

No, the practice has not been abolished at all. Up to now the legislation does not cover the domestic workers. It is just for one area, the farm workers, who are now covered by the Labour Relations Act. The domestic workers are not as yet covered. With the dismantling of the homelands – certain homelands had had legislation for domestic workers - the National Manpower Commission has now got to work on harmonising industrial relations for one South Africa, not a fragmented South Africa. So this is going to push the government to make up its mind and legislate for the domestic workers.

The transitional constitution which is now in force in the country instructs Parliament to create a commission on gender equality. Has this already been created? What do you see as its tasks and opportunities?

I said that during the TEC there was a subcommittee, which was focusing on gender issues. I am sure that is going to go on. I haven’t as yet come across what it is that they are going to be giving some preference to in that particular committee. But being a worker, there is something I am going to insist on and that is that the committee should look at a social clause and how it affects us as women.

What do you see as the essential problem facing women, the essential issues to be dealt with affecting black women in the townships and in the rural areas of South Africa at the moment?
There are many, especially homelessness. There is a lot of homelessness. Our country has developed and grown so fast, people are living in shack areas instead of homes. Women are badly affected by being homeless, and that goes for the rural areas as well. People are struggling with no water and long distances to walk to work. If there is no good education for the children, the first person who is affected is the woman. Mothers are badly affected if there is no progress in anything. So they are very special, and it is very important for them that there should be progress with homes, there should be progress in education, and they have got to be made as comfortable as possible. Hospitalisation is becoming a private institution. Even though we never had old age homes, at times some of the elderly people could go to hospital. Now that cannot be afforded. Again it is the woman who is going to have to look after the elderly and the sick. So the role of the woman is growing day by day. From babyhood to adulthood the woman is involved.

Can we perhaps now come to your writing? What was the impetus that made a writer of you when before you had been a factory worker, a labour leader and a trade union organiser, all sorts of things in fact, but you hadn't in your earlier career been a writer? What motivated you to put pen to paper, to write it all down and provide us with a record?

There are certain things I am grateful to apartheid for and this is one of them! Had it not been for apartheid, had they not put me into prison, had they not tortured me, I would never have known that I can be a writer. A friend convinced me by saying, 'you have been to all the hospitals, you have attended so many other treatments, but you know what is good for you? It is to put it on paper'. It is very therapeutic for you, you must write about what has happened in your life, it is very therapeutic, because it is like a session each time when you get it out of your body and put it on paper. That's what made me a writer.

How do you actually go about writing? Do you write by hand and then edit over and over again? Do you dictate? How do you proceed?

It started as we are doing now. Because it was a friend pushing me to do this, she used to interview me every time we met, at any meeting, in any country, in South Africa, overseas, anywhere. And we discovered that there were repetitions. I wouldn't know what I had said the last time and we were repeating what we did all the time! It had to be transcribed, I read it and made certain alterations, and I had someone help me edit. But I ended up scribbling and writing and this is where I am with the Book of Hope. I never taped, I was always writing myself.
Do you regard your earlier procedure as more like the African tradition of story-telling, of passing the story on to the younger generation in oral rather than in written form?

Yes, yes, it definitely was. And at the time for me it was not very significant how I did it and why I did it. But now that we are where we are in South Africa I seem to value my book very much - to see that many a person is going to read it some years after today and will know that there was apartheid and this is what apartheid was all about.

It does constitute a historical record of a very important phase in the history of your country, doesn't it, apart from the creative aspect of the writing, but simply as a historical document? It is important that works such as yours be there for coming generations to find out what it was all like in those forty years.

Yes. I have grand-daughters. My life is all surrounded by daughters, so I speak as a woman person. They insist, please write again, you must write. We sit down and argue about what I've got to write about. I think they got their inspiration from the first book, so that just shows how much it means to the younger generation itself.

In South Africa, you know, we each have several names. I'm Emma Mashinini, but I'm also known as Tiny. You find that there are other children who are my children's age group who just know me as Coqo Tiny, which means Granny Tiny. One was at Wits University busy writing a piece about this Emma Mashinini, and she did not know that this Emma Mashinini was the same as Coqo. When I went to her home, she looked at the picture in the book and became very excited. So I really think it means a lot to the younger generation and I encourage so many people now to say: Please document.

You mention in your book that you had participated in a film called Mama, I'm crying. I confess I know nothing about the film, nor about your participation in it, so I'd like to ask you about that.

Yes. It was Betty Wolpert and Joyce Seroke. They were making a film called Mama, I'm crying. They had discovered after about 50 years, now that they are friends, that they lived in the same area. They didn't know one another because of apartheid, because they could not play together. This woman then moved to Europe, but she remembered a nanny in South Africa who had brought her up, who had been like a mama to her, a mother to her. She went to South Africa to look for this woman and she found the children of that woman. Their mother had died and her mother had died, and they regard one another as sisters now. It was called Mama, I'm crying, because once their mother was nursing her and she wondered...
who had brought them up. So *Mama, I'm crying* was a very important
story.

*And you played a role in the film?*

Yes, I was asked to come and play a role in the film.

Strikes have followed me all my life was published in England by the
Women's Press wasn't it? And I see it has now been published in the States as
well. Did you feel that this deprived you of the real readership, namely the
people of South Africa who didn't have access to it? Is the book being reprinted in South
Africa? Is it available in South Africa now?

Now it is available. It could not have been printed in South Africa because
of the State of Emergency. Yes, it did deprive the South African readership
of the book. It is mainly the universities and some of the intellectuals, who
would have access to the book, unlike in England and in the US. I think
the trade unions made a great fuss about my book. The TUC in Britain
and the trade unions in the US, they really made a very big fuss about my
book and it had a lot of readership. In the US in fact they actually even
produced a hardcover, and they are using it in the universities very much.

*What has been the reader response to it, as far as you can judge?*

Well, I think that it has exposed them to quite a number of things. Their
response is many times that nobody thinks anybody can forget the name
of their child. It breaks their hearts and it exposes them to a number of
things. I think it has been read.

*It seems to me in a sense that your book can he placed within two traditions of
South African literature. The one is, of course, the tradition of prison literature.
I'm thinking of works by Albie Sachs, by Ruth First, by Breyten Breytenbach.*

The other is the writing of life histories by women. One thinks of Ellen Kuzwayo,
Sindiwe Magona and, of course, of Helen Joseph and Mary Benson.* Are you
aware of their writings? Would you place yourself in these two traditions?

Yes. I know all the people you have quoted quite well. In fact, I'm going
to England to spend a few days with Mary. I have spent some time with
Sindiwe Magona. She has already written her second book, you know.
She is going ahead quite a lot. I need to work hard to be rated with them.
It was not a best-seller, my book, when it came out in South Africa, so I
wouldn't easily say that I rate myself with them. But because there are not
sufficient women writing I'm very proud of that. I need to work very hard
and spend more time. And I will have that time, because maybe I will be
retiring before long.
You were saying that Sindiwe Magona has now written a second book. Many people who write a first book must be tempted to write a second one, and I understand you are doing just that as well? How are you getting on with your own second project? Is it finished yet?

No. It’s not finished, and I’ve had very little time to do it. It will be only by 1995 that I’m going to concentrate a lot of time on it. It is going to focus on women as women, their involvement, their contribution. And maybe it’s a good thing that I have waited until now, because I can say a lot of praise about the role women have played up to the time of going to the elections. And then there is the experiences of the various countries I have gone to. It would never have been easy for me to say things about what I have seen in Cambodia, in Mozambique, how other countries are struggling during the governments of apartheid, because they always want to say, ‘You are better than other countries.’ And we’ve never been ready to accept that. The book is the exposure of some of the struggles, and I want to write about women. As a writer you know that things always come when you start writing.

Will you be writing about the experiences of women internationally, of Cambodian women, for instance, as well? What occasioned your visit to Cambodia, a country which, I imagine, very few South Africans have ever been to?

Yes, it was very unusual. Many people were very scared on my behalf to say why am I going to Cambodia. It was when I came here for the publishing of the book. Three people were elected to go to Cambodia to speak to the people, to give them hope, to say: don’t think that this is the end of the world. There is hope after everything. They wanted people who have been survivors. One was a survivor from Palestine, the other one was a survivor from Germany, and I was a survivor of apartheid. So the aim was to go and give hope to the people of that country, to say that if I could do it, you can do it as well. So I think it was a very good journey.

The Jew and the Palestinian you just referred to are presumably those that you mention in your contribution to the Book of Hope, who in a sense give you so much hope for a reconciliation in South Africa too between people who were once on different sides.

They could travel together now because they had reconciled. After all that they had gone through, they could still reconcile. And in South Africa this has been demonstrated too. We see our President Nelson Mandela and Mr. de Klerk. They can sit and talk, and differ, and agree to differ. That is what reconciliation is all about. I never thought that I will reconcile very easily, but you are just forced by circumstances to say, you need to
reconcile. South Africa is now at a very interesting stage where people are speaking about a Commission of Truth to encourage reconciliation. There should be Commission of Truth, where people should confess what they had done, and then the transition of reconciliation will be strengthened. It seems to be encouraged by the politicians and by the churches. I saw my archbishop also as very supportive of it.

How did you experience the recent elections?

Ah! You know, at the opening of my book I’m sure I’m going to say that on the day of elections for me it was a three-generation election. Why three? It was myself, my daughter, and my grand-daughter. Can you imagine how long I’ve waited to vote that I had to go and vote with my third generation?! And there was so much joy in that, on that day, standing in lines, I did not want to go and vote on a special day when they were saying, people of a certain age should go and vote. I didn’t want a hand-out of a vote. I had worked hard for it, and I had to stand in the queue to go to vote.

That’s wonderful. You conclude your book Strikes have followed me all my life, with the lines: ‘when liberation is achieved, then, I must say, I am prepared. I’ve lived a hard life, but I have always wanted to see the day of liberation. And when we get there, as a coward, perhaps, I am prepared to die, to say: I’ve lived and struggled for all these years. Now that we’ve achieved justice - now that we’ve attained that - now may I not rest in peace?’ (p. 135) Now that the day has indeed arrived and you have seen it, you don’t seem to be resting in peace, you seem to be as busy as you ever were!

Writers are never honest people. Somewhere I think I said, the day when Nelson Mandela comes out of prison I’m ready to die. He’s been out of prison for some time now. He reminded me about that when he saw me and he said: ‘I think those people in prison were very busy, you know, they know so much about what was happening. I hope you are not going to die because we see that we still need you.’ Now the day of liberation has come I want to see the implementation of what we were fighting for. The reconciliation, reconstruction and development which we want to see in our country. It will be a joy to see that, you know, to see people having homes, to see children going back to school. Just to have a home and family life for people. I think that’s the time when I will be ready to die.

Can I ask you one final question, which I imagine will also perhaps reflect something of your own career in the transition to a post-apartheid society? What has brought you back to Geneva this time?
I'm here in Switzerland with a tripartite group from South Africa, a group from the employers from the workers and from the government. We have come to the International Labour Organisation and South Africa has just become a member again after 30 years of absence from the international world of labour. Luckily I was here in November with Jay Naidoo and others when we were pleading with them that we needed this recognition. We knew that we were going to win the elections and that we would join and become members of this important organisation. I am here with my minister of labour, Tito Mboweni, and I am the next delegate. It's two delegates for the government, one for the employers and one for the union. So I'm one of the two delegates of government. I never thought that day would ever come.

Times have changed. Congratulations.

Thank you, thank you.

(Note: I should like to thank our student Corinna Wohlfarth for transcribing this text. GVD)

Notes

5. The Wiehahn Commission was appointed under the administration of P.W. Botha to inquire into industrial relations in South Africa. Pursuant to its recommendations, black unions were allowed to register and to negotiate labour agreements on an official basis.