

INTERVIEWEE: Helen Suzman

DATE: 6th March 2007

PLACE: Illovo, Johannesburg



Q: So firstly, do you remember when you first became aware of John Vorster?

A: Well I think I became aware of him as soon as I got to Parliament because he was already a man that one listened to and he had obviously authority and so one became aware of him but I became more aware of him, of course, when he became the Prime Minister after Dr Verwoerd was assassinated then I had even more to do with him, but as Minister of Justice I had a great deal to do with Vorster because those were the years of detention without trial. The 60's, 70's and he had made no bones about his intention that he was going to maintain White domination in South Africa. There was none of sort of the ethical pretext of Dr Verwoerd, that if you gave people independent Bantustans, they could rise to any heights but they mustn't try to compete with Whites in so called White South Africa. Of course it was a hopeless idea because the Bantustans were all poverty stricken except one had some minerals, Bophuthatswana, and then Blacks flocked into the urban areas in order to obtain a living.

Q: So how do you think the political landscape changed in the 1960's and to what extent do you think Vorster helped to bring about that change?

A: Well, in that he was a Minister of Justice at the time and immediately after the 1960 pass revolt, they introduced the idea of detention without trial and that was first house arrest, then it became a 90 day arrest, then a 180 day detention without trial and then eventually the formidable Terrorism Act of 1963 which allowed indefinite detention for purposes of interrogation.

Q: Do you remember having any particular feeling about the fact that they were naming this police station after Vorster?

A: I thought it was very appropriate. There was nothing else. They couldn't name a lake after him or any peaceful rural setting. No, I thought it was very appropriate. I'm not particularly keen on naming anything after anybody but that was an appropriate thing to do.

Q: Do you think the building represents anything ideologically?

A: Well I should think it meant a great deal to anybody who was in there and had been detained and interrogated and possibly jumped out of the window. I would think it would mean something to the families of those people.

Q: And then when Vorster was Minister of Justice did you consider him an efficient minister?

A: I think in his own aims he was efficient, there is no doubt about it. He knew what he wanted. He was quite ruthless, he had no particular feelings about people in detention and their families and the fact that people very often didn't know where the detainees were being held so that they could at least try and bring them some food or something. But I must say this about Vorster, he was a very good debater. He was not emotional, he stated his case, with precision and with knowledge and with conviction and I had many a debate with him I must say.

Another thing which was good with Vorster as far as I was concerned, was that he always gave me an interview when I asked for it. I had no difficulty. I used to phone the department and I would have an interview and if it was during the parliamentary session I used to go up to the Union Buildings and amazingly enough there was no security there at all. I used to march up the steps and get to the building itself and there used to be one old chap, probably an "oustryder" with his head on his shoulder, fast asleep. Nobody asked me to open my handbag, there was no metallic intervention and I went straight into the adjoining office to the minister and his secretary was outside and she took you inside. He offered you a cup of coffee and then he said, "What can I do for you?" and I would say, "Lots you could do for me," but whether he did anything for me in the end was doubtful although one thing I know is that I was successful in was to get an exit permit for Ruth First, who had been detained and rumour had it that she was on the verge of suicide, because she had been detained for 90 days, released, taken to a telephone booth, told to phone her relatives to come and collect her and then she emerged from the booth they re-arrested her for another 90 days. And she knew this could go on indefinitely and in the end she became very depressed and we heard via people who came out that she was on the verge of suicide and I was actually phoned by Braam Fischer to know if I would intervene on her behalf, despite her mother's objections. Mrs. First finally said "Ok go ahead," because she heard that Ruth was really very ill. And I said to Vorster "You don't want to have a woman detained without trial to die by suicide in one of your jails do you? It will be headline news all over the world." And Vorster just looked at me and he said "Ja, I will think about it", and he did! And he gave her

an exit permit. In the end of course it didn't help her she went first to England and then she ended up in Maputo where as you know she was blown up by a letter bomb.

Q: And meetings that you would have with Vorster what other kind of things would you discuss?

A: Well they were always business affairs, always to do with detainees, prison conditions, interrogation of detainees, that sort of thing and he always listened and I must say in parliament we had many really robust debates, I think that's the best way of putting it, and there was a certain amount of respect, mutual respect. I respected him because he was really very good after Verwoerd's mad ideas which we couldn't really entertain and he was certainly much better than his, we didn't know then, but his successor. But I respected him as a good debater and he actually respected me too because on one occasion he said he thought I was worth ten United Party MP's and I said I thought he underrated me.

Q: But do you think that he was quite set in terms of the way that he viewed his security policies?

A: Oh yes, I think without a doubt. The maintenance of White domination was his basic idea and he was prepared to do anything for that, to allow all sorts of interrogations, to allow what after all, were assassinations and he was in charge, he knew what was happening. But the end objective was, as far as he was concerned, the only necessary justification for this policy.

Q: And do you remember if he ever used his experience as a prisoner in the Koffiefontein camp as justification?

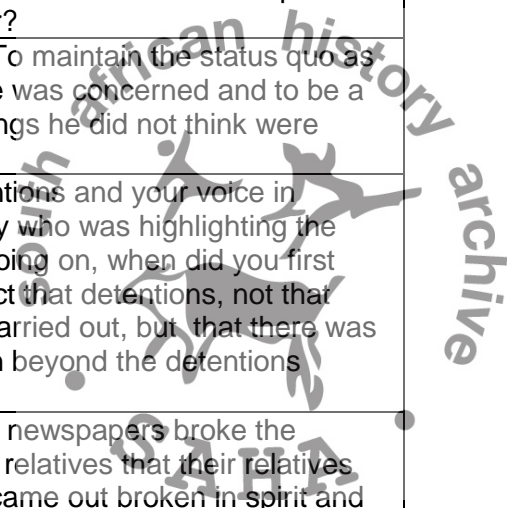
A: He never mentioned that to my knowledge. No, I mean we all knew he'd been an internee during World War Two as a Nazi sympathizer but it was not something which he dwelt on, not to my knowledge anyway, I may have missed it of course, I wasn't there for every minute of everyday.

Q: So you don't think that it's something that might have affected his attitude towards detentions?

A: Well he might very well have said, "Well if that's the way they treat me because I'm anti, the system of the British government and I want the Nazi system and I understand them. Well I in turn, when I have power, I am going to behave in the same way," it's possible, but I can't say for sure.

Q: Vorster was also seen as a reformer in terms of his foreign policy, it seems to be quite a contradiction between his so called outward looking, foreign policy

and his very iron fisted security legislation inside the country.
A: Well I think that in certain respect he didn't think that it was very important. For instance he allowed a non- White player to come and play in South Africa in a team and he didn't think those things were of great importance. And he visited occasionally the foreign countries and to him the interior, the internal control of South Africa was his prime objective as far as I'm concerned.
Q: So hard line Nationalists who accused him of being a reformer, do you think they were misreading him?
A: No, I don't think they were misreading him I think he very rightly decided that when certain things were irrelevant to the main objective, discard them. Why keep them on as an additional incentive to anti South African ideas or comments overseas?
Q: And how would you characterize Vorster's period of rule as Prime Minister?
A: Well, determination. To maintain the status quo as far as the main objective was concerned and to be a little more flexible on things he did not think were important.
Q: And in terms of detentions and your voice in Parliament as somebody who was highlighting the fact that tortures were going on, when did you first become aware of the fact that detentions, not that detentions were being carried out, but that there was something else going on beyond the detentions themselves?
A: Well as you know the newspapers broke the stories and I heard from relatives that their relatives who'd been detainees, came out broken in spirit and body and you couldn't ignore those things.
Q: And what was the response of parliament?
Well of course a lot of jeering and shouting and screaming but nothing that one couldn't cope with, they weren't very smart. They were just rather abusive and one can cope with that. And I mean there was no nonsense after Biko died, there was no argument that the police had killed him. Everybody accepted that, except the magistrate.
Q: Do you think that Biko's death changed anything in terms of the way that detainees were treated?
A: No, I think just that the police were told to be more careful in their methods of interrogation and not to smash anybody's head against the wall which is what they did to Biko of course. So from that point of view I think they were told, whether they in fact carried out the instruction I wouldn't know, to be a little more



discreet in the manner in which they handled people they were interrogating.

Q: But people who were detained they would come to you and show you evidence of abuse?

A: Yes the odd person did come to me but I mean it was so general and it made no difference so I knew about the circumstances and I just did what I could which wasn't much.

Q: Were there any other avenues actually available to them to do anything?

A: You mean legal avenues?

Q: Ja.

A: No, not really because the law was that the ninety day law allowed detention without trial. So there was no attempt to get that law, by detainees, to get that law overturned, one could talk about it in parliament and say how bad it was or what it was doing to South Africa's image overseas and so on but the detainees themselves had no power.

Q: And do you think that as security legislation got worse that there was an increase in the number of detentions?

A: Of course there was a increase in a number of detentions but there was also an increase in the amount of Black resistance and world disapproval because non of these things were secret in the end they were all publicized by the press and one knew. I mean the Biko thing was headlines worldwide and Sobukwe was never actually tortured but I mean he was kept in jail for 6 years longer on Robben Island than he had been sentenced to by the courts of law. So there was a Sobukwe clause in one of the detention without trial {laws} and Vorster introduced it and I remember him saying at the time "I will have to keep this man in jail even though his sentence has expired because we know that he has not changed in the interim. He is the same man that he was when he went in entered and he's dangerous to the country." And so they sent him off to Robben Island where he was in solitary confinement except for a very antagonistic warder looking after him. He wasn't put in with the other political prisoners like Mandela and Sisulu and the others. He was kept quite separate, I visited him in his little cottage on the island and he said to me, "I'm forgetting how to speak." Ja.

Q: Did you ever have access to police stations or cells where detainees were kept?

A: Not to cells and not to police stations except you know just to go in and lodge a complaint or something, but to prisons, yes, I got access to prisons

and I used my position to go and examine the conditions in prisons which were pretty bad but then that was mainly the question of treatment within the prison, overcrowding and so on but let me tell you, it's worse now than it was. It may surprise you but I visited a prison a couple of years ago and the conditions were worse because there were more awaiting trial prisoners stuffed into one cell than any I had seen in the original times of visiting prisons, because of crime of course and long periods of awaiting trial and general overcrowding was terrible. It is terrible.

Q: And you were quite involved with the Aggett inquest?

A: Oh yes I was indeed because I used to get little notes sent to me from a person who had been in prison with Aggett and watched him being tortured, made to stand naked and various other things. Not actual beating or anything like that but the real sort of treatment of disrespect and knocking down the man's self. Trying to reduce a man from a human being to somebody who was totally in the power of somebody else.

Q: And you brought this up, you read these notes in parliament?

A: No I didn't read the notes in parliament. I was getting these notes in secret meetings with this chap who had been with Aggett and we used to meet in the streets of Cape Town and he used to give me the information and I used to try and use it without sort of in any way implicating the person because he was very nervous that he would be detained himself and of course I saw Aggett's parents about all this and went to the funeral and so on.

Q: And did that case change anything?

A: No I think the only thing that ever changed was instructions to be more discretionary, that's all but not anything else and in the end the police, the Special Branch had really tremendous powers, nobody took any notice of any of this, it was all done in the interests of subduing Black opposition and maintaining White domination. It was as simple as that.

Q: The Aggett case happened during Botha's reign as Prime minister?

A: Yes, And then President.

Q: And how do you think Botha's rule was different to Vorster's in terms of security legislation and detentions?

A: I think he had the same basic ideas although he

wasn't as nearly as intelligent as Vorster. He was a very unintelligent man, a bully, thought you could conduct debates by screaming at your opponents instead of raising important points in the argument but I must say this, in all fairness, that during his regime, which was 10 years, a lot of important changes took place amazingly enough. I mean Blacks were given trade union rights, they were given rights to strike which was very important. The two laws, the Immorality Act, the Mixed Marriages Act, both went. The reservation of work went, you know which was the so called "Civilized Labour Policy" where all jobs above a certain level were reserved for Whites and the Pass Laws actually went in 1986 while he was still in power. The reason for this is not a change of heart by Botha, let me assure you, it was the fact that these laws were becoming impossible to implement. They simply couldn't control the situation. It was too much Black antagonism to it and Black activism with Umkhonto We Sizwe and there was the children's revolt in Soweto in 1976, I mean all these things added up to making the laws quite impossible to implement.

Q: Did you raise concerns about things like the state of emergency?

A: Oh yes well that was, you know.

Q: What was the response of your fellow MPs?

A: Well I never got a response except, as I say, a good deal of abuse but every now and then changes took place not because of me but because the situation became more difficult to uphold.

Q: What kind of challenges do you think the police faced in the 60's, 70's and 80's?

A: Well, they only faced the widespread opposition of the English language press, the opposition of the students at universities, the English language universities and the opposition such as it was in parliament, that's all.

Q: You said you had access to prisons and you were never allowed into John Vorster Square for instance? You were not allowed into the cells?

A: Not into the dungeons, No.

Q: Did you go to John Vorster Square?

A: I can't remember quite honestly but I think I did. There was no special reason to go there I mean why there than any other say a prison or a police station in Potchefstroom or Wakkerstroom or whatever where detainees were being held?

Q: And then going back to Vorster, what happened to him?

A: Well there was the whole scandal that took place over the purchasing by the Government of the Citizen in order to have an English language newspaper in their favour and you know it was a scandal because they denied using tax payer's money for that purpose and the whole thing eventually was revealed and Vorster was kicked upstairs.
Q: Do you think it was an unfair for him to go?
A: No, I don't at all, I don't at all. I was very much against this obvious misuse of taxpayers' money and Vorster and I were on, as I say, respectable debating terms but never what you could call friends.
Q: Do you think there was a difference between Vorster the man and Vorster the politician?
A: I don't know, I didn't know Vorster the man at all! We didn't play golf together, we didn't play bridge together, we didn't have a cup of coffee together. We didn't meet in the parliamentary pub for a friendly drink. So there was none of that. It was purely a political association.
Q: Did you ever have any interaction with Hendrick Van den Bergh?
A: Only through debate, through debate, not otherwise. Very formidable man.
Q: What kind of role do you think Van den Bergh played in terms of security?
A: Oh very important role. He was head of the whole security thing as far as I remember and he was as tough as old nails, difficult man.
Q: And I mean in the end how do you think that history has remembered Vorster?
A: Well history is being changed all the time. They are busy airbrushing out of history, everybody they don't want there, I mean White liberals for instance are totally taboo. Nobody was anti-Apartheid except the Black movement "Umkhonto We Sizwe" or perhaps five White communists because I think that nobody was at all against the system which of course is a total travesty of history. I don't know how first of all, I mean obviously all the faults and the mistakes and tragedies and terrible hardships that were imposed on people will probably be remembered.
Q: Is there a particular story that you can remember that sums up Vorster's character for you?
A: No just the image of the man sitting in his office and listening intently and very politely and him in debate in parliament, I had no other association with him.
Q: Did you ever see him smiling?
A: Oh yes on one occasion I remember one of the

reporters said to him “Mr Prime Minister won’t you please smile?” and Vorster looked at him and he said “I am smiling.” But that’s the only story and I’ve got a wonderful photograph of him in a police van thing. A wonderful photograph I think it’s in my book, with him saying “I am smiling.”

Q: Today they’ve renamed John Vorster Square but the building is still the same, how do you feel about this?

A: Ja well the building is the same and what it contained hasn’t changed and history of it hasn’t changed. It was a grim building then, It’s a grim building today though I don’t think it has got the same tragedies being carried out inside the building that you had during the apartheid days and there was a story of people jumping out of windows and so on in order to escape torture or interrogation.

END OF INTERVIEW

