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Interview : Amy Thornton

JF What year were you born?

A 1932.

JF And where ?

A Cape Town.

JF And I mean it would take a long time maybe you could isolate what kind of family background are you from?

A Sure. Um, Jewish. My mother came here as a child from Russia - I think far Western Russia, you know somewhere, the Ukraine I think or near the borders of Poland or something like that (not Lithuanian or something like that?) Not Lithuanian, definitely not. My father had been born in Poland, in Warsaw and went to England as a babe and he came out to S.A. at about the age of 20. He had socialist ideas; he used to tell me he remembered Trotsky speaking in the East End of London and remembered listening to George Bernard Shaw in the back of a sort of cart; speaking in the East End and he remembered, I'm not sure of my dates, if they are clear, I think the Match Girl strike which was one of the very early strikes in England. He was very much working class, poor, poor Jewish family in the East End of London.

JF And when he came out here what did he do?

A His brother came out and then he came out and they worked themselves to a standstill for two years to raise the money to bring their parents and brothers and sisters out. He had been apprenticed to an uncle who was a cabinet maker and then he and his brother eventually opened a little furniture store. Which never grew into a huge emporium because neither of them ever became business men. I mean by rights they should have had the biggest furniture business in S.A. but um, that was his life.

JF Can you remember, your mother did she work?

A My mother worked in a shop; she married my father at the age of 25. They had four children. They always had quite a struggle. We never

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A had a car and..had poor relations in the family who began to become fairly affluent.

JF Were they political?

A Yes. My father; there was a group, I forget what it's called, and they were kind of supporting Bolshevik Revolution, the Bolsheviks even before they had come to power. And..I don't think they actually joined an organisation but I do know that he was refused naturalisation because having been born in Poland didn't have automatic citizenship as a British person would. And he was refused naturalisation for years and years and years. And I thought that this was just one of his stories until I was doing Economic History at university and Dr. Wickhams said oh, Rietsteen, any relation to Issaac Rietsteen? And he'd been researching that era and he'd come across his name on the lists of the police. So it was actually confirmed to me, you know that um, he never subsequently joined any organisation but he introduced me to my ideas, I think of socialism and social justice.

JF Ok, so what were the spurs of your political development?

A Well, I was born in 1932 which was the year that Hitler came to power. I remember the war and my parents very much involved in support of the great Russian effort in the war and there were things like the Friends of the Soviet Union and the Russians were our glorious allies and things like that.

And by the time the war ended I was thirteen and I came across a Zionist Youth Organisation called Hashanir Hatzier, 'the Young Guard or the Young Watchmen'. It was a very radical, far left Zionist youth organisation. And there at the age of thirteen and fourteen we used to have study classes on Marxism and we read poetry and music and completely disdained what we called bourgeois things- no lipstick and..it was very much based on the German youth organisation called 'eirvondefol' of youth: strong, virile, unafraid, nothing like make up and high heels and..that was the kind of ethic and furthermore, one didn't..one became a worker and went to Israel and worked on a Kibbutz. You couldn't remain in Hashaner Hatzair and not follow through. My brother who also joined this..you know, we had lots of great fun in the organisation. He remained and he went to Israel and has worked on a kibbutz ever since.

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A And by the time I was 18 I didn't particularly want to go to Israel - didn't want to go to a kibbutz and um, I'd been to England when I was 18 or 19 and then come back here and found myself getting involved with young radical people like Alby. That's when I met Alby and Mary Turoc and Ben Turoc. They were on the treason trial ? . H Festinsteen who is now very imminent scientist in England. Heimie Rochman who's now a doctor in Chicago. A whole crowd, mostly white, very few..if there's a non racial organisation it started off having lectures once a week in Mowray and we would invite people like Jack Simons, Ray, and various prominent people to give talks and eventually we got premises of our own.

We expanded from being a weekly lecture group to a proper sort of youth organisation. And we started a night school, where we offered to teach any body, anything and among the people coming to this night school Herman Chatoivu and George Peak, I don't know if you've ever heard of him. He became prominent in SACTO. And those were the two you know who stand out in memory and in this group were Alby, Dennis Goldberg, Esme Goldberg, Bubbles Thorn, myself and others you know.

So from being a once a week thing it became an every day of our lives thing. It was a great education for me and a very nice relaxed, you know, everything was legal because congresses were legal and people could have parties and do things and there was no banning orders and you know, there was no surveillance and politics was quite a lot of fun. Nothing really desperate.

A lot in the society kind of faded away as we grew older and we sort of found our way into worst, the whites into Congress of Democracts and I found myself getting more and more involved in that and in um, education work and teaching politics in the townships and things like that. And working on New Age, you know the newspaper.

JF Did you write for it or work..?

A Occasionally, little bits of writing. I used to edit all the letters that came in. Many of them from people who were just about illiterate and they had to more or less be re-written. But I used to do all the filing of the blocks and the cuttings and the whole toot and the photographs. They were a tiny organisation working with Brain Bunting and Lionel Foreman and Fred Carneson.

And at the same time - by this time I had become a Nursery School teacher and I had to teach in the morning and I always had my after-

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A afternoons free and school holidays and I had plenty of time for the this. And I had, there was a Joint Congress Committee set up largely to organise the Congress of the People and I was Secretary of the Joint Congress Committee which brought me in touch with the ANC and SACPO, there was no Indian Congress in Cape Town. And people like Reggie September, Johnny Gomez, Alex Laguma and they were there from SACPO and from the ANC, Zolli Mlindi who's still around and Bernard Fernand, Look Smart who is dead since - I think he died in detention. And Elijah Lawsa and various others, you know.

And that was..the Congress was legal and there was a campaign for the ^{the people,} ~~COA~~ the COP itself, whatever congress were representatives of all the congresses - from the platform somebody would speak from each of the organisations. If we went out into the country to do organisational work somebody from each of the congresses would go.

Congress of the People itself - I was one of the delegates to go and of course you talk about the differences, the thing that strikes me today for example is the kind of high tech politics we have. And the amount of sophistication and the sort of money involved. I mean we never ever bussed people to meetings - I can never remember it happening..People came - they might have organised buses themselves but now if there is a big meeting money is raised and buses are sent to fetch people. That didn't happen before. And it strikes me as not necessarily such a good thing because um it always sticks in my mind I went to see Juluka play; I like them very much whether they are politically kosher or not. I went to hear them at the Goodhope Centre which holds about 6000 people - the Goodhope Centre was packed, the cheapest seat was 6 Rand - I would say that definitely more than half the audience were black, nobody had organised their transport and they had got themselves there and had paid 6Rand to get in.

So I reckon if people feel strongly about an issue then you don't have to bus them there, they will come. But we didn't have that kind of sophistication so when we had delegates to send to the Congress of the People some of them had gone up by train early. People like um, Sonja Bunting and various others, they were helping to organise, they went there early. I went there with the delegates so we hired two lorries. And we travelled 25 in each lorry, huddled up in blankets with your legs...no buses. And I came to the launch of the UDF and we thought we'd manage to get away secretly and the police didn't know we were going. I mean can you imagine it, one national road so by the time we reached Beaufort West there was a road block out and we were

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A stopped and it turned out that the two people driving these lorries hadn't permits to carry passengers. So they arrested the drivers and confiscated the two lorries as evidence, what do you call these things when they, not evidence - the exhibits. As exhibits and they subpoenaed all of us as witnesses, in Beaufort West to appear in court; this was a Thursday, to appear on Friday.

And so I tell this story quite often but I think it's a funny story in a way. Ok. So there we were stuck, the lorries were impounded and put into the jail yard, into the police station yard. The security Police came up from C.T. and one by one trying to question us. So I had rushed off and phoned Sam Khan in C.T. to say what is the position they're trying to question us what must we do. He said all you have to do is give your name and address. I mean those were happy days when there was a rule of law, habeas corpus and all kinds of goodies. And I can remember walking into the room where the Security Police were and just saying, you don't have to say anything, just give your name and address and nothing else. They were furious but they could do nothing.

So there we were all you know, being asked these things, being processed; then I phoned C.T. again and I said look there's a taxi driver around the corner and he says he can take 6 people whose names have not been taken, so if we can get some money we can get them off to Joberg in this, hire this car. So I was told that somebody would be coming up, I must wait on the national road; they'd reach there by 8 that night and they would bring money so Alex Leguma and I can't remember, some other chap, and I went and stood on the national road on, do you know Beaufort West? (mm mm) The national road goes right, I don't know what it's like today, but I'm talking about 1956, 1955, right through the centre. It's one road, one long road about two miles long and that is Beaufort West. So we went right to the end of the town to wait on this road and dusk came and no body had arrived. We waited about 3 or 4 hours, you see and there were some Afrikaans chaps who had been playing rugby and when they saw me standing there with these Coloured men they began to get very, very agitated. They came and asked me if I needed help, if they could take me anywhere and in 1955 I was 23 and slender and debonair. And I used to, I think I was the only person I knew at that time in my life who wore jeans and red boots. And we got very frightened actually and we decided it was an impossible situation, that these people were going to attack us. So back we went to the Police Station, which was almost in the middle of this two mile

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A long town and we went into the police; we, all of us were prepared to settle down and sleep in the Police Yard, in these two lorries. There was nowhere else to go. We got into these lorries and you know its very cold in B. West in June, its like ice at night and there we all huddled in our blankets, some people trying to snore, it really was very uncomfortable when all of a sudden I heard someone calling Amy. And I look outside and there was Jack Tarshich; served 12 years in prison, subsequently has died. And I said what are you doing here? He said, for God's sake I've been outside whistling the Internationale for half an hour. I went and woke Alex Leguma and we got out of these lorries over all the sleeping bodies and Jack had climbed over the jail wall into the yard. So Alex and Jack and I climbed over the jail wall out of the yard and got into Jack's car and went right out into the Karroo and Jack gave me £300 and then we had to go back and I thought no, I'm not going to climb over the wall again, but Alec climbed over the wall and I walked in through the police Station; and I remember this cop being very perplexed. He hadn't seen me go out and now I was coming in. We didn't have to report in because we were only subpoenaed to appear in court. Anyway, spent the rest of the night in the lorry and next day we appeared in court and they adjourned the case till the Monday. And then subpoenaed only 6 or 8 of us to appear. But that meant that nobody could get to the COP.

By that time people in the township had heard about this wierd crowd that had come along and they came to offer accomodation. No sorry we had to appear in court, this was Friday, again on Saturday. They came and offered accomodation and people went out to the townships and they spoke about the COP told them all what was happening and I couldn't go to the townships. Not because it was illegal but I think everyone would have been uncomfortable to have me. You know I sort of stuck out- I was the only white person there amongst the 50 delegates and I was scared to be seen on the streets in B. West because when I walked people were pointing, oh that's the white woman with all the kafirs. And so I got a room above a cafe and sat there by myself and the whole time it was terrible.

Anyway the taxi driver didn't materialise and we couldn't get the car and appeared in court on the Saturday. They postponed the case till Monday. I stood up in the court and asked the Magistrate if I was allowed to speak and he said yes, and I said we are stuck here through no fault of our own and we've got no money and how are we supposed to eat or cope and we have to be back in court again tomorrow. So he

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A ordered that we should get witness fees. And the African delegates got 2/6 a day, Coloured delegates got 4/6 a day and I got 15s. a day. Anyway we used this £300, we had to buy food for everyone and we appeared in court again on the Saturday. And on the Saturday, they postponed the case for 2 weeks. And said that only.re subpoenaed 6 of us. Which meant that 44 people were able to go back without having to appear again. So I stood up in court again, am I allowed to speak, yes, I said may we go back to C.T. in the lorries and he said no. That would be continuing the offence; so then I was desperate because the people who were on the lorries, don't forget they had to go back to work on Monday. You know it was going to be just this long weekend. So, I asked who would be in charge and they said the Chief of Police; well the Chief was at the top end of B,West, a mile away and I ran there because the 2 drivers of the lorries wanted to go you see. I ran into this man's office, I remember I was so breathless I could hardly speak and I said that we were stuck, and these people would lose their jobs and that the lorries were going back and that we were prepared to pay for the petrol and if people had to wait for trains even if they got travel vouchers, they'd all be late for work. And I got very agitated and started to cry and he was a really old style Afrikaner and he didn't like to see a young white woman crying and so he gave me a permit to allow them to go back on the lorries. I remember I ran back to the people and we can go. Rushed off to buy food and people got on the lorries and went back and and a couple of weeks later Ben Turoc and I and couple of others I don't remember who they were, had to appear in court in B,West again. We weren't called as witnesses; the chap who owned the lorry was fined £80 for each lorry and that was the case. But we never got to the Congress of the People.

JF Let me ask you um, you were ^{not} the only white, ^{but} white woman only?

A I was the only white delegate amongst, on those two lorries.

JF And what about Ben Turoc?

A He'd gone up by train?

JF How come he had to go to come, you said...?

A Because he had, well sorry Ben had to come back because he was the person who had signed the agreement, who had hired the lorries.

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A That was why he was subpoenaed.

JFinterested in, I mean this is really the human side. But I'm thinking that there are lots of middle aged Jewish people in America who would identify a lot with what you said in the beginning, the year that Hitler was born, issues about (ja and the war)but would just not understand what was going on - I mean it's just that basic racism right the cultural bit, you know and even left people, you know, the socialism those, because of that, had anything with the Soviet Union, certain ...but the whole thing of a white woman and these blacks and people who lived in townships ie. black workers, even like some neat jazz musicians and intellectuals. I was just wondering (they are isolated)-... was very isolated...

A My parents were always very supportive. The rest of the family varied, you know; were very uncomfortable with it and before the banning orders started it was alright because we were a community of our own but when the banning orders came and you were banned from... First you were banned from any gatherings for common purpose, couldn't go to any meetings, but you could go to a social gathering. Then the bannings became more intense and you were banned from social gatherings and you were banned from associating with anyone else who was banned or listed, which meant you were cut off from your very best friends.

I remember that period as..I was banned for 14 years and it was tremendous isolation. It's far less so now because there was just a handful of you whites and the time the congresses were banned most of the whites who'd come from that generation of people who were concerned with the war and so on, they were scared and withdrawing. They were..there was a handful, you could count them on the fingers of one hand. How many whites there were you could associate with. And then they introduced permits that you could get into the townships. There was far more surveillance than there is now. You couldn't get into the townships.

And so many people were imprisoned, so many people were banned, so many left the country, you know after Sharpville and the emergency and things like that, that it was difficult. It was very difficult.

JF You were banned from what year to what year?

A I was first banned in 1959 till 1973.

JF So that really raises the question of, and I think it's important to

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JF establish you know, just the things that are basic to understanding to you but to other people, that you know this wasn't some great charity thing. I mean this is derived out of strong motivations.. (oh, I was totally committed) but I mean did, how could you ever articulate what was in it for you? I mean how did you move from socialism to making your whole orientation to black people, but black people where you could hardly communicate with and have a social life with and...?

A Um, it's difficult to talk about because it sounds kind of corny or pompous or something like that but I grew up from my early..I ..the things I remember as myself and it hasn't sort of deserted me even today, is that I have never lost my sense of real outrage at injustice. I really feel outraged. And I think when I get angry enough about a situation then I stop being scared. And I can't say I'm in a state of anger all the time and I won't say I'm not being scared. There have been some not so nice experiences.

There was a time when people would phone up and say, in the middle of the night, I lived alone and you'd get a phone call at three in the morning and someone says, you are also on the list of the KKK and puts the phone down. And uh, you come home and someone has put a bullet or something in your letter box or painted something on your window. The worst thing of all is they attack your little car. I had this baby Fiat, I didn't have a garage and it was really attacked so often. Tyres let down, slashed them, oh all kinds of nasty things.

Um, you did have a sense of isolation. The banning orders were far more rigidly applied. I mean for eg. part of the..they haven't done it for years now, was insist on reporting every Monday. I had to report every Monday for more than 5 years. And I forget once so I was arrested and I was charged under the Suppression of Communism Act found guilty and sentenced to a year's imprisonment of which 51 weeks were suspended. And I had to go to jail for a week, as an ordinary convict.

Now, at that stage the magistrates would never suspend an entire sentence under the Suppression of Communism Act. Now days they do suspend the entire sentence. There were few of us so I suppose we were watched more. You know um...

JF I guess I'm also asking about um, just coming back to my theme here of whites, I mean how with all of that isolation, anyway, my question is

JF How did you percieve of yourself as a white in the struggle then? I mean did it seem like a kind of an aberration where you perceived the injustice and these were the people who were speaking out and you were one of the few...?

A Oh no, it wasn't ever anything as, I think as conscious as that. As I say I went from this radical Zionist Movement to the Modern Youth Society to the COD, to closer and closer involvment. I don't remember ever stepping aside to actually um, say you know, I am white and I am committing my..to me it was a kind of natural progression. I became more and more involved, ~~more~~ deeply committed and I can't remember sort of ever making a conscious statements to myself about it.

JF Were you challenged? I mean sometimes those conscious statements come from when people say, I mean did people, family friends, I mean, often what happens is you..only your subconscious ...

A Family were embarassed. Look, some family actually were supportive and even in a way admired what they called my courage. Others were embarassed, they didn't like to hear the same name mentioned; being banned was quite a...oh look there...my ex husband was giving back some old letters and files and see that cutting there (mm) um that was from the Times of London. That was when I was banned the first time. (mmmm)

I also, I loved my job you know, that was a great compensation to me was teaching and finally my banning order included not being allowed to teach. That was a very big blow. A really big blow. And by that time most of the people I associated with were either in jail, or overseas or dead. And I was very much left on a limb and my two closest friends were banned and I could no longer see them.

JF Turn over...who were they?
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A One was Sadie Foreman who had been married to Lionel Foreman who died in 1959. And another one was a friend of mine Benda McCorrio, who wasn't really politically involved but you know she knew a lot of banned people and eventually she got banned as well.

JF So did you establish friends with people who weren't political or did you just (you must understand, no, that people who weren't political were scared..)or were you just isolated?

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A The parents of the kids I taught, they respected me as a teacher and ah, I reckon I was a jolly good teacher and you know, that was ok. But they didn't ever like to discuss anything outside of the kids or the nursery school. And um, so when I was banned from teaching as well and if you were banned you couldn't work anywhere which was the premises on which there was printing or the premises or the..it was well, now impossible.

And that was the fortuitous moment that I met my husband and I married, and had children. And so I um..I met him and we decided to marry. He had two children who sort of came to me; three weeks after the wedding I was detained under the 180 day clause as a potential witness in the trial against Fred Carneson.

JF What year was that?

A That was 1966. And I was held for 94 days in solitary. Eventually I was released. Then I became pregnant and I had Dorothy, the one you met now and oh dear, it sounds very dramatic. When Dorothy was born um they discovered I had a melanoma and I had surgery for that and I got another banning order that year. And we applied for certain concessions of the banning order to be lifted; the Security Police, citing as one of the reasons that I'd been ill, I mean I had to get permission from the Security Police to go to the Nursing Home and have the baby, cos I would have missed one Monday of signing the register.

I had to get permission to get married because it was a gathering in terms of the Act; it was my husband, myself and two witnesses. So I had to get permission to attend the wedding. So I got a letter saying the restriction is relaxed and you may attend the ceremony.

Anyway, the...Security Police went to see the surgeon that operated on me and he told them yes I had cancer and this was the prognosis and they actually went up to the hospital, I believe, to check that this would be a prognosis and so then I confounded them by not dying. But anyway, they lifted my,..they eventually lifted my banning order and..

JF Because of the illness?

A And ja, because you know the man I married was completely un political and there I was with this baby, all sick and all this kind of thing. And my husband was involved in some project on the island of St. Helena

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A so we .. would certainly have commuted to St. Helena and back to C.T.- was completely outside of any political thing. And um, they gave me a passport that was valid for the island of St. Helena only and always expired. It was valid from the day I left and expired on the day the ship returned.

And then in 1973 I think they actually, yes, they lifted my banning order. And I actually got a passport which wasn't valid only for the island of St. Helena.

JF When you were detained how long were you detained for?

A I was detained the first time in 1960 after Sharpville - that was about $3\frac{1}{2}$ months.

JF You mean after Sharpville did they just do a swoop?

A They declared a state of emergency. (And then?) The first swoop they picked up all the executives of the all the Congresses throughout the country and then 10 days later they picked up anybody whose name had ever appeared on any of the lists; so it was an odd conglomeration of people who hadn't been involved politically for 15 years but had, in the early '40s in the middle of the war, had joined the Communist Party found themselves in jail. That was really quite something,

And um, was arrested three times subsequently. In 1966 I was detained (for the Carneson trial?) for (were you a state witness?) as a potential state witness. Now that was the 180 day - you remember it was first was a 90 days clause: Alby was one of the first people arrested then. Alby was also arrested as a potential state witness. They then picked up everybody and they said they were being held as potential state witnesses in the trial against Fred Carneson. None of us were ever called to give evidence. 94 days. And as I said subsequent to that I was pregnant and involved in my family.

And then, I was completely involved in my domestic life and I mean I was interested but very much involved in this?- I had four small children and um, until one day there was a knock at the door and there was Oscar and Peta and I hadn't seen them for years and years. And he said won't you come and help with some typing at the Food and Canning Office. So I thought but you know, Oscar I'm not a typist, no. I'm sure you can type so come along and so I went along to the office.

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A And there I saw this young Afrikaans chap - Jan Theron, who asked Oscar introduced and I thought who the hell is this? And that is how I came to work at Food and Canning for 3 years.

JF Did he ask you or Oscar ask..?

A Oscar asked me and Jan confirmed it, and I must say that I, apart from, I think that Jan is taking a wrong line on the UDF and that and the workers' thing way out, Jan is the most fantastic person. I never met anybody with such a capacity for work and he's really dedicated and really is someone that I admire tremendously although I don't agree with the line he's taking. He is a fantastic person. And it was really quite a revelation working with someone like that. But because I was there and that...I remember Oscar came one day and said listen we're going to start a woman's organisation again, come. And we started the United Woman's Organisation with Dora Imana and Margaret Desear and you know, myself. We got this thing off the ground and ^{it} ^{to} grew quite a big womans organisation.

JF Say the names ...

A The United Womans Organisation...

JF No, the woman...

A Dorit Emanan... (Emanan?) Dora (^{that's right} Tamana), who has died subsequently. Dora and Lillian Ngoyi had gone to Europe together. They went to Switzerland to an international woman's conference, they went to China, the Soviet Union and they travelled on my pass.. Lillian Ngoyi travelled on my passport and Dora Temana travelled on Rosalind Ainsley's, was Ainsleys writes lots of books, lives in England now... on Rosa's passport.

JF How did they do that?

A In those days you had to show a passport to book a passage so we went and we booked for them on the ship. You see, then the idea was that you go onto the ship, get the luggage on board and they get on board and you get off. And they had documents saying that they were citizens of S.A. which was then still in the Commonwealth: they could land in Britain. So the cops were tipped off and were waiting for

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A us. They didn't get Roz because she flew to England the same day. They got me and um, they got this luggage and opened it up and took out Dora Temana's enormous bra and corset and said is this yours; believe it or not I was slender in those days. And anyway, we decided..and so they had been organising a rally in Alexandra, see, so we rushed up and decided we'd still try and get them on the ship. So we put the luggage on the ship and I had to go down to the docks to get tickets and I could see them walking along the quay and they got onto the ship and I rushed along the gang way and gave them their tickets and showed them where the toilets were and said ~~stay~~ there till you know, for at least three hours.

And as I was running to get off the ship one of the officers came up and said oh, Miss Rietsteen, the Captain would like to see you in his cabin and I said yes, I'm coming in a minute. I'm just going to fetch something in my cabin and I ran off the ship as fast as I could and Sammy took me up the docks and we drove up onto the mountain and we saw the ship leave. It was the regular mailship leaving on a Friday afternoon. I mean we were jubilant, they were gone you know.

Got a phone call that evening from Alexandra - you better not sleep at home. They were taken off the ship - they stopped the ship, they searched the ship and they found them. And they took them off the ship and..but it had a happy ending because they took them overland and I don't know how they did it but they..whether it was bribery or corruption or what, they got out of S.A. by air and they went to these conferences. But they wouldn't let them take their luggage, because it was in my name and I had to go down to the warehouse to claim it. And again the Security Police came and opened up these suitcases and opened up the corsets, Is this your luggage?

JF What year was this?

A God, I can't remember. What year was this -1953/4 or somewhere around there. It was before ... It was the beginning of Lillian's you know, growth to national figure. That trip abroad gave her tremendous confidence.

JF And so when Oscar said he was going to start up a womens organisation again it was with Dora (yes) in the Transvaal? So Dora was down here?

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A Dora was here. She died about two years ago.

JF And so to get um...he asked you...I'm just interested that you had (I found myself being drawn back) and your banning order by then had been lifted?

A Oh yes, in 1973. I'm now talking about 1979/1980.

JF So when did they knock on your door to say come join Food and Canning?

A Wait, I'll tell you when. '77.

JF So really it was until '77, even after the banning order was lifted did you just figure...

A But I was so involved with my kids and my family. I mean I was aware of things, I read the paper and you know, I remember the Soweto and um, the woman who worked for me who lived in Guguletu and the night that the police actually um, what is the word, instigated the migrant workers to attack the local wor..and Francis' mothers house was burnt down that night. And Mildred Le ? phoned me and said you must try and get the press to come here to tell me what's happening. So this must have been '76.

And I remember phoning the Archbishop and trying to get him to go and Colin Eglin and so on and the press.

But I was totally involved with my little children who were going to school and lifting them here and lifting them there.

JF But also was it easier to stay out and be with the kids because, I might be pushing but I'm just wondering..because of the times. Because there was the lull, because there was BC, because of the place
.....

A No, no, it was much more subjective than that. When I found...you know, when I had cancer I thought well, you know, I'm going to be lucky and I mean I've been very lucky. I've been fine but at that stage it wasn't so far behind me and I really thought that my greatest priority was to be with my children and to kind of set them on the road to life as it were. That..that was my major priority.

Interview : Amy Thornton

A And uh, and there were new generations of people. I didn't know them and one to me was a ^{ve}relation. And affluent and then young people. I started to meet young radicals and I suddenly realised, you see, don't forget ^{at} the time when I had gone off to St. Helena and was not been involved politically, there was so...was..you cannot believe what a tiny handful of people had been there. I was just about the only person I knew left in C.T. who hadn't opted out. You know, quite officially opted out, or left the country or something.

And to find these young people who were active and so many young whites - it was amazing to me. This was a whole new generation of people who weren't scared, who could handle banning orders. I had grown up in a time when everything was legal, well, when the rule of law applied. When there was habeas corpus and then this was eventually eroded. So one had one foot in the old camp. So it was quite a shock to deal with these new things.

But the new generation had grown up knowing nothing of anything being legal. Accepting torture and solitary confinement - it's a new ball game. It's a new type of person. And I was amazed by these people And I find myself..found myself being drawn back in..into things in... the United Womans Organisation in particular, because that was the only political organisation at the time, before UDF, before this proliferation of organisations like COSAS, and ? you know, you name the alphabet and there's some organisation.

And the United Womans Organisation was the only real radical, pro..ah political organisation.

JF And you did help set it up or they started and asked you to join or what happened?

A Well, I went to the inaugural things and I didn't get involved organisationally and it started getting involved and I was asked to come and ...I mean I went to one of the conferences and somebody would come up and said, the speaker hasn't arrived, will you open the conference, kind of thing. I mean I've never been a kind of high profile person. I've always been a kind of backroom girl but I found myself being placed in this situation of chairing things...I mean I don't know where people got the idea was I'd never done this ... I haven't.

And I find it very difficult to do, but it's sometimes comes off quite well. And so..between that kind of thing my other role was like

Interview : Amy Thornton

A with you, sort of living historical monument. I found for eg. at the time that Lionel Foreman was alive and started to prepare for a doctorate on history...history of the political movements in S.A. there existed two books: there was 'Time Longer Than Rope' by Eddie Roux and there was Jack Copes biography of Comrade Bill who had founded the Communist Party. There was nothing else, nobody was researching anything. Lionel was the first.

Lionel went to Jo'berg and went to the home..oh gosh, who was the founder of the I.C.U....God my memory..(Lawrence...^{Clement}?) ja, he went to his home. There in a garage covered in ratshit he found Clement ? notes, letters from the I.C.C.U filled his car and brought them to C.T. And I remember I sorted them out for him, cleaned them off and put them in some kind of chronological order and he started to research these things..these papers have been put in the university now by Sadie, known as the Foreman Papers, and are used for research. But nobody was doing this kind of thing.

I then discovered there was a generation of students who wresearch and know more about anything than I ever...I mean they^{were} researching the woman in the '50s, the this, the that, the Congress of the People, the COD, well you must be aware of the amount of work and research you know the whole political spectrum was...and so every now and then students would pitch up and say can we come and toalk to you about this you know. And do you remember anything about that; so I used to say to the kids well I become an historical monument now, kind of thing. And I still get called on in my historical monument act, you know, like we're having a thing on the treason trial, will you come and talk about what happened in the trial. You know, I'd been involved in the treason trial defence fund and obviously in the campaigns around the treason trial. And will you come and talk about this.

So that's my kind of ah, well although I think it must be pretty exhausted I can't think of anything else anybody can come and ask me about. But it's very nice,..bean very nice being in contact with young people and where they're at.

JF So you pretty much felt that you know, you'd paid your dues and things were over and everyone else had left and you had gone and involved...had your illness which must have been something to make you especially want to focus on your family. You didn't envision kind of re surfacing?

Interview : Amy Thornton

A Yes it... these things weren't actually you know, now I'm going to not do this, or now I am going...that was the kind of trend.

JF But you didn't kind of envision, when the kids were grown up, well, I'll see then, I'll come back into political life; I mean I'm just wondering...

A I never envisioned that kind of long distance future. (mmm) I really didn't. I really didn't.

JF So then...you did the Food and Cans just for 3...why did you leave after 3 years?

A Well, the..main reason was...I now have thoughts about it, but one of the main reasons was that I wouldn't work more than half days because I thought that I needed to be at home in the afternoon and it was during that period that my marriage broke up and I felt very strongly that I had to be home with the kids in the afternoon and I was in a position that my livelihood and rent didn't depend...I mean I was only earning a R150 per month. And Jan really needed someone to work full time. And I was wanting to go...I was going to go overseas and so..you know I sort of left.

JF What was the name of the job? What position was it exactly?

A In some ways I could say I was Jan's secretary - officially I was a typist, but it was very much more than that. But I enjoyed being there. It was amazing you know, seeing the Union resurrected because after all these secretaries had been banned unions had, really you know, a lot of the branches weren't functioning at all. There had been problems with people stealing money - all the usual things. And Jan re built the union, you know and that was tremendous and now it's an enormous ah, union; it's absolutely mushroomed.

JF And so after that you..what year.did you work at Food and Cans?

A I would say from about say 1978 to 1981 something like that.

JF And Oscar had to ... he actually came out here and knocked on the door, I mean....

Interview : Amy Thornton

A No, we were living in Wynberg at the time. Ja. I hadn't seen Oscar for years.

JF And why did he think of getting you, I mean...?

A Because the girl who was working as a typist ah, wanted to go out and look at the Paarl branch for various reasons of her own and they needed somebody to help in the office. And I know what had happened, I had seen Oscar for the first time in about 15 years, I don't know, how many years, we had...I had taken the kids and we had gone out to an Ecumenical Service - Crossroads had just been established and every year they used to have this Ecumenical Service, and I wanted my kids to come. And there I saw Oscar.

And it must have been a few months after that. You know, I mean when I saw Oscar we exclaimed and embraced and said hello, hello, how are you? and that kind of thing and then he pitched up.

JF And um, that...was it quite exhilarating to be back in this sort of swing of things? And see, as you said the whites and that kind of..

A ...the new generation, yes I was so impressed with them.

JF And then you..you..that job you quit in 1981? (Ja) and did what?

A More or less nothing. Um, Nothing, it's sort of true, nothing. I was involved in ah, the U.W.O. and um, very much with my kids. Also the time my divorce was going through and uh, that was certainly taking up all my attention. (mmm) And ah, and then um, I never..I as a result of the divorce we moved into this house and I was in the fortunate position of not having to go to work but then I wanted to wor..I mean, I am, started looking..I worked a couple of months... there are 100s of agencies you know, that function and I worked for ?-Care for a couple of months but again I wasn't prepared to work the whole day. I sound very spoilt, don't I?

But I've always felt you know, there's this again, very strong thing about the stable home. I mean obviously if I was in the position where I had to go out and earn the rent, there would have been no question about it, but I was in a position of choice. And I felt it was important to my children. And₂

I also worked for N.R.C. and now I just suddenly found myself 3 weeks

Interview : Amy Thornton

A ago ah, I got very ill, really very, very ill, I actually landed up in hospital and they opened me up and found I had a burst appendix which I think is not so usual for a woman of 53. Anyway, I came out of hospital 10 days ago and now I feel when I ... I'd love to get a job again. I'd like to work half days, but it's not easy. There's a huge recession and again I have a very big inhibition that we have so many comrades and young people who can't get work, you know, that it's not fair of me to go and take these progressive jobs where there is some money, when I don't have to have a cent for the rent. You know it's difficult.

JF UDF being formed was that... what did that mean to you?

A Ja, well. You know the..well, there was set out this call in Jo'berg, I thought well, now this is right..this..I mean I had, I don't want to sound pompous but I had been saying what we need is a United democratic front of all democrats to really get the greatest possible opposition to apartheid and when Boesak made that speech in Jo'berg I was thrilled and delighted. Said we've got to have it here in C.T. The next thing I knew right there were a lot of people thinking there's got to be a UDF here, and the United Womena Organisation was just about instrumental in getting the conference together. So they had one conference-about 40 or 50 organisations, which Dave Lewis, Jan Theron played a very negative role, you know, worker control and the workers aren't ready..And then a second conference was called and they didn't come. And this was where I was asked to chair this conference.

So um, it was quite a ah, a..I mean I've never chaired a big conference - there were 40 organisations there and a lot of people uncertain..the thing was really to get..to keep on sort of pulling together the points of consensus. I remember I said, ok I'll clear the morning session, I remember, I chaired till about 1.30 by which time I seldom felt so tired from concentrating so hard. And then somebody else took over. I think it was um, oh crikey, Secretary of UDF in the Cape, Trevor Manual. And I went home and the next morning I got a phone call and congratulations, you're a patron of the UDF. And they had this thing in the paper that the UDF had been formed and the patrons were Nelson Mandlea, Betjie and..... which I thought was terribly funny.

Interview : Amy Thornton

A Me.. (ja) ja sort of at the end of this list.

JF And where was this meeting that you chaired?

A When did we start the...when was the UDF launched? (You mean this was the launch?) This was..this launded.. This conference agreed to form the UDF in Cape Town and from this came the national launch which was held in Cape Town. (a ha.)

JF Right, right. So that was..how was..can you remember when that was?

A That was at its..this August will be two years...

JF UDF was launched in August '83, August 20th 1982

A Right so it was earlier in '82 (no it was '83 - it was launded in August, '83....) ok, so I think this conference to launch the UDF must have happened round about I think, March. I can't remember.

JF Boesak's call and the ? Boesak thing was July, was January. (January)

A Right so it must have been about March, April or May. Possibly Ma y because Dora died that morning and we had a two minutes silence. Somebody phoned and said Dora had died (mmm) she was over 80.

JF And with the UDF, that's what happened. You said something just about what it..earlier you siid you were looking forward to it being launched and did that mean that you definitely going to be involved and did you..?

A Ja, I was involved quite a lot but then um, ja I..no I attended a lot of the meetings of the General Council; well um, I suppose you know, if I am a patron then I go and I find myself having to sit on platforms and things like that, which I'm not mad about. As I say I really, I think you've got to have it in you to really seek that kind of high profile thing.

But I..I haven't been to a General Council meeting for a long, long time because again you know, the divisions and the this and the ah.. I don't...I find that I'm getting old and impatient. I can't understand how people can't put aside those things and really go for what

Interview : Amy Thornton

A what is important and that is the greatest unified opposition and to draw in all opposition. I mean you get people saying we're not going to have anything to do with the Black Sash, oh we refuse to associate with NUSAS or this one won't ... and to tell you the truth I haven't really got the patience for that kind of thing.

JF Um, but how would you explain that um, in terms of, I mean you wouldn't want to have the PFP in the UDF. What are you saying would be associated with and embraced and what not?

A Well, I don't put the Black Sash in the same category as the PFP. Nor do I put NUSAS in that category. And I think that the trade unions should be in the UDF. And I think that the UDF should adopt the Freedom Charter as its program - I think the kind of program they came up with, it's no great shakes as a document. No body ever refers to it..it's..and it's got 80% of the elements of the Freedom Charter in it anyway and I think that the Freedom Charter is the basic document and you know, and more and more organisations are considering it and it's not too radical and it's kind of almost hypocritical to pretend that this is not what people want. Then..then...I think the strength of the Freedom Charter lies in the fact that it does account for just about everybody's aspirations. Whether socialist or national and ah I think.....

End of tape496