

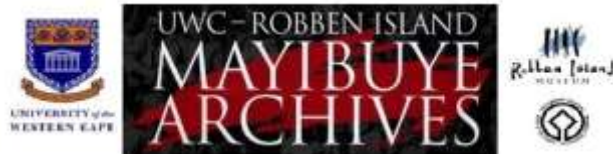
Ruth First Papers project

## Interview with Ismael Meer part 1

An interview conducted by **Don Pinnock** circa 1990. Part of a series carried out at Grahamstown University and held at the UWC/Robben Island Mayibuye Archive.

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**DP:** ... no, I don't think so. So you went up to Jo'burg from here? You were at Sastri, weren't you?

**IM:** Well, I did my - ja, I completed at Sastri in 1939. Then I did my BA at Natal, which meant studying at an Indian high school on Saturdays and Sundays. Three woman ... the only people prepared to lecture to us **[included]** the famous Mabel Palmer, she started these classes. And then in the middle of my course - I had done in the BA some law subjects - the Natal Law Society discontinued law lectures to all blacks: Indians, africans and coloureds. The university society had made representation that we were penetrating into a white profession, with the result that we had to go and get

our legal training elsewhere. So then I went to Wits. Now, while I was there, I lived at 13 Corlett House **[name correct?]** –

**DP:** Nelson Mandela lived there.

**IM:** - 27 Market Street. It was my flat. I was the caretaker of the flat, and it was at that flat that we had the radical students of Wits meeting quite often. I met Ruth at the university, she was a student there.

**DP:** Was she the same year as you?

**IM:** No, I had done my first degree. She was not doing law, she was doing her science degree. Social Science. She was doing her first degree and I was doing my law. There were interesting developments; we had a very favourable registrar, William Thomas, and we formed a student body called the Federation of Progressive Students.

**DP:** I was going to ask you about that, ja.

**IM:** I was a - well, two of us, there was a woman who subsequently taught at Natal University, she was a student there, and we two held senior positions, president and secretary of that body. That is, **[name indistinct - perhaps Violet Junod?]** and myself. And we had a sort of a grand slam in the elections, winning half the engineering faculty and almost all the other faculties. And I worked very closely with Ruth, because before I left Durban I had been a reporter for the **Guardian**, I had been doing some work, and the Meer family had a newspaper of its own.

**DP:** Which was that?

**IM: Indian Views.** It was founded in 1913, just before Gandhi left for India. Gandhi had founded his own paper, the **Indian Opinion** in 1903 and this was the opposition paper to that because I didn't agree with the Gandhi settlement. We criticised it and said that it was a reactionary settlement. So we had this opposition paper, and that was edited by my cousin, MI Meer, at the time. I had been doing a little work for the **Views**, also for the **Indian Opinion** which was edited by Gandhi's son Manilal. By 1942 **The Leader** had just come out, which was the first black paper independently owned and not **[indistinct]**, because it had a street circulation. It was sold on the street. The **Indian Views** and **Indian Opinion** were purely subscription.

**DP:** Who was running **The Leader**?

**IM:** It was run by a man who was working for the **Natal Witness**, his name was Paddy Brando **[name correct?]**. It still continues; **The Leader** is still published. Have you seen any recent copies?

**DP:** No, I haven't, no. Thanks, that's great.

**IM:** So ... we ... I don't know how much you want on the journalism generally, but at about that time there was a very important paper in Durban called **Inkundla yaBantu**. It was edited by Jordan Ngubane, who eventually left for the States and returned to support Inkhatha with Buthelezi. He died a little while ago. But Ngubane was, to my

mind, one of the very top black journalists of his time. No doubt about it. I didn't agree with his views, but he had the ability to express himself well and –

**DP:** What political tendency was he supporting at that stage?

**IM:** Well, he was a member of the African National Congress Youth League. You see, we had in Durban before I left for the Transvaal, in 1936 when I was in high school, we formed - we called it "liberal", although it was a word which had connotations to many in the left - we called ourselves the Liberal Study Group. And that study group was, to my mind, very important indeed, because it trained young Indian leaders of that period. It also trained people to think in terms of a non-racial future, and it allowed not only people of the left to come into it, but also everybody. And there we recruited a man who was also a promising journalist, SI Dhlomo.

**DP:** Oh, really? Did he work there?

**IM:** Dhlomo was a very important man in the Liberal Study Group. We went once, for instance, to a debate from Durban to Stanger. He had never been to Stanger before, and we had a debate. It was a very interesting debate, there were our four people from the Liberal Studies Group and some debating society there. But before that I took him to show him Chakassville. He was very moved, and he said "leave me alone for a while", and he wrote a poem about Chaka the same night and I read it out at the evening there. He, now, was the first member of the African National Congress Youth League who worked on a broad front and was supporting a non-racial future when nobody was doing it in the Transvaal, even. Long before Nelson Mandela and Tambo

started.

**DP:** When was this, that you're talking about? I mean, when did he write the poem?

**IM:** It was about '38 or so. '36, '37, '38. Around that period. And he then - Dhlomo became a very important speaker in many black forums in Durban. Even in 1944, '45 he was still speaking on the Indian Congress platform, which was long before we had any formal arrangements. And let me say this - because it was at that time at Wits Nelson was also doing law, so we were in the same faculty. Nelson used to stay in Orlando. It was very difficult for Nelson to travel back every night, so he used to put up at my flat. Now in Durban all non-Europeans, so-called, were allowed to sit in the last three seats of a tram –

**DP:** Oh yes, you got arrested for going on a bus with Nelson, didn't you?

**IM:** That's right, I was charged! **[laughs]**. I was charged with carrying a native when he was not - a white man could carry a native on the same bus provided that the native was employed by him. So a white woman could carry a maid who was carrying a child. An Indian mother who had an african woman working for her wasn't allowed to carry her.

**DP:** Was this in Jo'burg?

**IM:** Jo'burg. Jo'burg had separate buses for natives. So here - actually we were both going to my flat when it happened.

**DP:** Bram Fischer defended you?

**IM:** Bram Fischer defended me, ja.

**DP:** Now where did I hear that? Somewhere ...

**IM:** Well, you know, in Natal I stayed in the same flat as - myself and ... in fact when I left Johannesburg ... because I stayed over, I became the Transvaal secretary of the Indian Congress, so after I left the flat remained in my name but **[sounds like Kathy - indistinct]** occupied it. But let's come back to Ruth. Now I used to be also involved in giving her a lot of information for her stories and helping her write some of the stuff. Obviously this was easy for me to do because of the work at the Indian Congress. So I used to work very closely with her, and we used to also look for big scoops. And what bigger scoop can one have than to have Michael Scott moving in with me! He came to stay with me!

**DP:** Did Michael - oh, I see!

**IM:** Now Michael stayed with me for a very long time. There are fantastic stories about Michael. It was because Michael Scott was staying with me that we were able to get this big breakthrough into the labour conditions at Bethel. It was organised from flat 13 at Corlett House, and ... you know about Ruth's coverage of that. But Michael had in '46 been part of the resistance in the townships. Michael **[indistinct]** and then he lost his appointment with the church. So he was now **[indistinct]**. The shantytowns had

just started an organised movement of the people –

**DP:** The Sofasonke movement?

**IM:** Ja. I had sold Wits [**lottery**] tickets in Market Street, and one Indian whose name was [**indistinct**] Patel, he owned the India House, he won a car, and I went to tell him, you've won this car. And he said well, thanks for telling me - he was a very gentle man - I now donate this car to the passive resistance movement. I asked him to come and hand over the papers, he said no, when I give a donation I don't want people to know about it!

**DP:** Amazing!

**IM:** Always a very magnanimous man. And we gave that car to Michael Scott. He used to go and stay where the tin towns, the shantytowns were being developed, and nobody would touch **umfundisi's** car. They were prepared to take the wheels off anyone else's car, but his was protected. [**laughs**] That's the time when we had the - Ruth was in charge of the **Guardian**, I was editing the –

**DP:** She was in charge of the what?

**IM:** The Transvaal office of the **Guardian**. I was doing the **Passive Resister**, and we acquired a paper in the Cape which was –

**DP:** The **Standard**?



**IM: The Standard**, which was also - but you know everything, I don't see what else you want to know from me! **[laughs]**

**DP:** I know about newspapers, but not about the people inside them!

**IM:** Ja. We had the - you know the Race Relations has got a big volume where newspapers are discussed, and they say there were two newspapers which had cartoons. One of them was **Passive Resister**. We had a man called Maurice, he did our cartoons. They were interesting.

**DP:** I've seen those cartoons, ja. Who was he?

**IM:** Well, I don't know very much about him, he was someone that we used to pay and use him at the time. He was very effective. There was also Reverend Sigaminy **[name correct?]**, who was a very important man. He was very important in the sense that he was the principal of a school. A very tough man, so that they would put him in the pick-up van and he could say "hey, look, it's a mistake!" But they still took him. They would say "where's your pass", you see! He was in Johannesburg, in Doornfontein. He had been the first organiser of trade unions in Natal, long before anybody else had gone into trade union organisations. HJ Naidoo, one of the fathers of the trade union movement, came much later. But Sigaminy supported our work in that he went for the other side. So I told Maurice now this was our best thing, that Sigaminy supported our movement. So he said no, that's fine, let's think about it, let's put up a church steeple and a weather-hawk, and Sigaminy is **[indistinct]! [laughs]**. But a number of people

thought they were very brilliant.

**DP:** So that flat was quite an important meeting-place?

**IM:** It was a very important meeting-place. You will get something about that flat from ... what's the name of **[indistinct]** in London?

**DP:** Oh yes, I know who you mean. Benson?

**IM:** Benson. Mary. Mary has written about that time.

**DP:** Is that where Ruth would have met Scott? Or had she –

**IM:** Ruth would have met Scott because of the '46 passive resistance. Most likely she would have met him at my place.

**DP:** I have a feeling that Ruth may well have been interested in newspapers through you. I could be wrong on that one, but certainly - suddenly she got involved in newspapers at that point. Or was it just that she was at 'varsity and those papers were around?

**IM:** I don't think she had done any writing before she came to 'varsity. It was at 'varsity that she showed an interest in that. I think, if I remember correctly, we had Saturday afternoons where Ruth stayed to do the stories, and I would have said look, from the Indian Congress this and this is what's available. So let's get down what happened,

and then we'll deal with the townships afterwards. It was easier for me to be a journalist and at the same time be involved in policy-making on the body. That helped.

**DP:** I have not had any contact with anybody that was at university with her. So at this point I don't know what organisations she was involved in or what newspapers she was involved in at all, and that's partly what I'm asking you all these question about –

**IM:** Oh, Joe Slovo will tell you all about her, he was there at the same time. But the people that she was there with - I mean, from Natal there was JN Singh, who became fairly important in the Congress movement, myself from Natal, and Barney Fellow –

**DP:** Don't know him.

**IM:** It was a very interesting period, because the foundation for the Congress Alliance was being laid, with tremendous opposition from some of the people who later became strong supporters of the Alliance.

**DP:** Were the foundations of that being laid at the university or elsewhere?

**IM:** No, not at the university at all. You see, in the - at Market Street, a short distance from where I lived, there was the office of Dr Seme. Dr Seme was one of the four real founders of the African National Congress in 1912. He had his legal practice in Johannesburg, and he acquired Anton Lembede as his articled clerk. Lembedi was the kingpin of the organisation of the African National Congress Youth League. At that time the president was **[indistinct]**. So at the office of Lembede, which was the

office of Seme, you had - I think it was called [indistinct] that you had gravitated. Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Mda, Lembede - they founded the Youth League, and they were working on how to make the ANC take up a more positive attitude towards the problems of the african people. This was happening at that time. It happened that the people who were in the field of political action longer than any other members of the Alliance were the Indian Congress in Natal. And in Natal we had one big advantage that the trade union movement had been very well organised. You had the foundation of the Alliance laid in the Natal trade union movement, because you are already having africans, Indians and coloureds working on the economic issues together. And they were the most important people to give the Natal Indian Congress more militant leadership. So with this force from here, with one member of the ANC Youth League, and that was Dhlomo here, the Natal attitude was having an impact. And the passive resistance of '46 was again a Natal-based thing. All over the Transvaal when they were sending out resisters to go to prison, you were gaining a foundation - the core of the foundation was in the **[form of Natal-based]** resistance, because with Mandela going to prison, there were no Indians, hardly. You just had the token representation of the african people. So you had that happening. And although Ngubane in Durban with **Inkundla**, with the editorship of that was not in any way involved, he was able to say that look, I may not agree with some of these peoples' radical thought, but their spiritual sacrifice and their dedication I must admire. This was happening at the time. Now in '46 when passive resistance started, we had also the question of India bringing the whole matter to the United Nations. As we wanted to send some of the Indian Congress people to be in the lobby with the UN, I was given the task of going to talk to Dr Xuma, whether he would **[also]** be willing to go. And I found it a very interesting experience. He was in Bloemfontein, and the only time I

could see him was during the lunch-hour. I went hoping that he would finish the patients as early as possible. Sometimes he finished before one, so I would be there by twelve o'clock to wait for him. Sometimes by half-past one nothing had happened, I was told he was too busy. Then he would call me in and he would sit with his cup of black coffee and two slices of brown bread, and then he would say - and I would be very hungry by then! **[laughs]** - but it was not my way of knowing the tribal Zulus of Natal were very generous when afforded an opportunity for **[indistinct]**, and then he would continue with his tea and then I would say **[indistinct]** I have been asked by Natal to raise this matter with you and ... well, it went down fairly well, and he went with us to the United Nations. So by his going there, with also our people who were there and by the time India became independent on the 15th of August 1947, Xuma was already talking from our platform in the Transvaal. He made a very good speech when there was a welcoming of the two new dominions of India, he was a speaker there. All those things happened. Then came the real crunch, and that was the riots in 1949 in Natal. And out of the riots was born the declaration between the two executives which went beyond the '47 Dadoo-Naidoo-Xuma pact which accepted that the two executives should work together. But it that was only possible - Yusuf Cachalia will tell you more about it - for a solid three months. Yusuf became the secretary of the TIC - I was the first secretary and he was the next one - but we went and had discussions in the same office, **[indistinct]**, also the offices of the African Mineworkers' were there, with JB Marks. Three solid months we sat, and there were all kinds of suspicions. Then one day in the midst of this long drawn-out discussion Walter Sisulu said I don't want to go back and discuss this behind your peoples' backs with my committee. I want to state that I agree entirely with the idea that we should work together, and influence the main body to do so too. That was really the turning-point.

**DP:** So it was Sisulu who made that –

**IM:** Sisulu made that point. Not Oliver Tambo, not even Nelson. Sisulu was the one who said that. In any case, I was in the Transvaal. I had gone there to do my law. I would have normally qualified at the end of '46 but I dropped out and then I did five years of full-time Congress work. In those days nobody asked for any payment, because nobody had any money to give so –

**DP:** You were secretary-general?

**IM:** I was secretary in the Transvaal, yes. Then I became the vice-president - when the nationalists came to power in 1948 the civil service, of course - in those years permits operated. I was only allowed to stay there because the University of Wits with [sounds like Ryks] as the principal and William Thomas had made strong representation and I was given a permit to stay. But as soon as the nationalists came into power I was thrown out. And then I came to Natal and I was vice-president of the Natal Indian Congress here. And then came the - we were listed, all our organisations were affected, and under the listings my career in journalism came to an end. And then **[indistinct]** in '51 I started my practice. I chose to settle in Natal because I found it very profitable and very satisfying to work with the sugar estates around here. And in those days there was no legal aid so you went and sat in the courtroom, the magistrate saw you and you saw the large numbers of people who came in for pass offences and people who came in for Master and Servant. Some hesitation **[indistinct]** in the Law Society that I was **[indistinct]**.

**DP:** Can I ask you something else ? It's always struck me, the parallels between the passive resistance campaign and the '52 Defiance Campaign. I mean, a lot of the traditions of passive resistance become the –

**IM:** Ja, they're the same, because actually the 1952 campaign was launched at New Brighton in the Eastern Cape. People who were from the Indian sector, people who were there, were all people who had served with Tambo in prison. And the technique was exactly the same - it was to be non-violent. First you inform the authorities of what you were going to do and then you voluntarily go to prison and you starve. It was exactly the same. **[indistinct]** they criticised that method ... I remember in 1946 **[sounds like Mina Robe and Nearstreet Kahn]** were the people who had been arrested. They were taken to the Umbilo police station for the night. Now the station commander at Umbilo would sometimes 'phone and say "hey, Ismael, tell me man, how many people are you going to send in today?" I would say well, I think we've got a batch of about forty. "Can't you reduce it to thirty? We haven't got blankets for forty!" **[laughter]**. I had to provide the extra blankets for ourselves, for the ten, or reduce the number to see that our own fellows were not put into a discomfort before their own sentence.

**DP:** Didn't you also work on the **Call**?

**IM:** Ja. I founded the Call.

**DP:** You founded the **Call**? Because the initials on articles are ICM and they're

presumably yours.

**IM:** Ja, or "i see'em". Ja, HA Naidoo and George Kuhn were the two very powerful trade unionists here. I was still at - in 1939 - '38, I think the **Call** was, '38 or '39. But in '39 I was at Sastri, and we had our own college magazine that was usually edited by the english master. But they had made exceptions. I think in my last year at Sastri three of us were appointed to do it. So I had done that editing. And I used to write on education. Now my position was this: particularly as soon as I had finished at Sastri and I was taking these Saturday afternoon classes, I found that everybody was much older than myself there. I couldn't understand this. There were three of us there from Sastri who were just trying to ... so I discovered that all of them were teachers and they were trying to improve their status. There were about 121 Indian schools in Natal. Seventeen of them were state, the rest were run by the community. And the community schools people were normally paid salaries through a person known as the grantee. But 50 percent of the people got paid five pounds a month! So I was instrumental in finding out now who employed these teachers, and it was discovered that they were not employed by the state, and they said they were entitled to form a trade union. So I became the secretary of the teachers' trade union. Some of those articles there - I also edited a magazine called the NTU magazine, the Natal Teachers' Union magazine. That dealt with the trade union problem. The teachers in Natal marched with the industrial workers for a number of May Days, demanding that schools be closed on May Day and so on, until their wages were increased to that of the state schools and then they dropped the trade union! So of what I wrote, some of it will be dealing with the education matter and some will be with India.



**DP:** Can we just jump back to Wits? What was Wits like in those days? Was it a conservative university? Was there quite a lot of political activity?

**IM:** A lot of political activity.

**DP:** Why was that? Because it was the war years?

**IM:** Yes, because it was the war years and also it was an interesting period in that you were having this contact between black and white students was something fairly recent. In terms of the Cape Town agreement which was reached here in South Africa in 1937, Indians were to send - according to the agreement, Indians were to send all their graduates and undergraduates to Fort Hare. Fort Hare then **[indistinct] this government, and then [indistinct] to India, I don't know** how much consultation took place with the authorities, I don't know. But that was the thing, and for a long time Wits wouldn't allow in black students. But we were forced to go to Wits because of the government policies. At the same time the war period was having a tremendous impact, and generally we had the atmosphere around there, you know, it was the question of medical aid to the Soviet Union, Friends of the Soviet Union and all that sort of thing was connected with Wits. And Glen Thomas himself was a ... if we wanted to have a very big meeting with a whole lot of people speaking to us, he would agree, and he would agree to speak, and it would draw in a very good crowd. He was very popular. And he did not mince matters, he was talking against the Smuts government ...

**DP:** What was the SRC like at the time? Were you a member of it?

**IM:** Yes, I was a representative on the SRC. The SRC - again, the engineering students could be very difficult, could be very insulting. I remember I was asked to ... as a law student you were asked for opinions on the spot, and somebody hadn't attended from the engineering faculty three successive meetings. My opinion was asked. I said, he ceases to be a member of the SRC. And then an engineering student stood up and said ah - Willy Nkomo, a medical student from Pretoria, so and so, so and so, so and so - you want to rule him from the SRC? And I said if those facts are correct, Willy Nkomo ceases to be a member of the SRC. And this fellow says, actually we didn't expect that from you! **[laughs]** They hadn't expected me to go against a member of the Federation of Progressive Students, you know!

**DP:** They thought you were would have been racist. Ja. Could we just talk about Ruth? I interviewed her mother, Tilly. She's 91. Did you know her at all?

**IM:** Very well. Where is she now?

**DP:** She's in Jo'burg.

**IM:** Is she? How long?

**DP:** I'm not sure how long she's been back, but –

**IM:** Where is her brother?

**DP:** He's still there. Rodney.

**IM:** Where?

**DP:** I don't know. He lives in the northern suburbs somewhere.

**IM:** What is he doing?

**DP:** He's the managing director of a large firm. He's very wealthy.

**IM:** A furniture firm? Do you know?

**DP:** No, no. It's something else. What is it, I can't ... it's like Metro, but it's not ... he's married again, he's extremely wealthy, and Tilly is in a wonderful flat. But she's very old and she's getting a lot of memory drop-out. But one thing she didn't forget, or one thing she did remember was that she said Ruth wanted to marry you at one stage!

**[laughs]**

**IM:** So what did she say about that?

**DP:** No, she told me! She didn't say much about it, she just ...

**IM:** No, we were very friendly, we had a lot of things of common interest. I met - you see, they were both active, her father and mother were both active. So we came across them quite often in the general run of activities. But Ruth and I were very close

indeed. We remained very friendly to the very end.

**DP:** If I was to write about her, what would be the sort of questions I would ask about her as a person? And then as a journalist? A difficult question to ask, but ...

**IM:** Ja. But one thing about Ruth was that she was an absolutely committed and dedicated person. I suppose she would ... I don't think she was very easy to ... she wouldn't have a large number of friends with whom she communicated very easily, but she would have very close friends also. But throughout her dedication to her work was remarkable, and she had a tremendous capacity to work.

**DP:** People were quite scared of her. There were quite a number of people who were very scared of her intelligence and her tongue, was the impression I got.

**IM:** That's not my memory of Ruth. My memory of Ruth was that she was ... I had people saying to me at the time that she was - that they found it difficult to work with her in a committee and so on, because she was dominating. I think that wasn't fair on Ruth. It was somewhat of a mask. She was a very warm person, and the very fact that her real dedication to the people was so strong - that kind of compliment wasn't from the people. I think it would be absolutely wrong to assess her in those terms. My memory of Ruth is of a very warm person, and she would be prepared to make - as she did, in the end - make the highest sacrifice for the cause. And the cause to her were the people, and the people mattered. The way in which the people were restricted mattered, and therefore her dedication to justice and a fair national deal was consistent throughout her life.

**DP:** What organisations was she involved in?

**IM:** The Young Communist League and the Federation of Progressive Students. Those were her main activities. We had other types of organisation which were outside, you know, the ... I'll tell you one thing we did from my flat. We had a group of people, students, and we took Fordsburg - you know Fordsburg, it's there as you go down to Mayfair - we took the whole of Fordsburg and we had a complete analysis of every home. We knew who lived in it, we knew whether they were paying rent or they were owners, and all the problems of each family were very carefully indexed and kept in the records at my flat. On Sundays we went and sold the **Guardian**, and that way we came to know each person through selling in the streets. And we organised four Fordsburg areas to show what you can do collectively. We would go out there and - for instance, we got the women together, we used to buy in bulk and then they shared and then they saw the results of that and then they formed their own collective to continue with that. The committee didn't last for very long, but for as long as it lasted it was very important. One time we heard the little shops around Johannesburg were making a fortune out of the black market, and we thought **[indistinct]**. In '46 with the passive resistance those very shopkeepers were again financing to some extent our activities. We carried out a very powerful raid on those shops, and again I found myself being defended by Bram Fischer. I said "smash the black market!" in some of my speeches, and ...

**DP:** Was that on the city hall steps?

**IM:** No, at Red Square in Fordsburg, where now the Indian Plaza is. So the police said Aha! You said, smash the shops! They were paying the shopkeepers to report these things. But what was interesting when Bram defended me, and Bram appeared and said "now you will tell what happened" - questioning the shopkeeper, you see. So he said, must I tell your worship? Yes, tell him. So he said well, the next thing I saw Mr Bram Fischer walking round with two boxes of shorts from my shop, so he was part of the whole thing! **[laughs]** and Bram said, I want to recuse myself from this case, and the magistrate said you must carry on with it. I was found not guilty. But there was this systematic work, and these types of activity were carried out, which was ...

**DP:** Did Ruth work with you on those type of projects?

**IM:** Yes, oh yes. Oh yes. Ruth worked on ... we spent a lot of time together.

**DP:** To what extent would you, and also the tradition that you represent, have influenced her?

**IM:** I think that most of us were reading the same type of literature, and I don't know really whether traditions mattered. You know, what was happening was that we were living in an euphoric age where we thought that all man's problems would just disappear once we got rid of the vestiges of imperialism and so on, and then you would walk free. All human failings would not be there once you have an economic adjustment. There was that period, you know, that time when people had that sort of approach. It was long before the discovery of Stalins's activities. So you had that period. But I think it would be correct to say that we were perhaps brought together by the type of

activities which brought us together. At the same time my background was quite a difficult one. I had grown up with an Islamic background, and I couldn't find any way to relate my Islamic background in South Africa with my non-racial activity, except to the communist movement, which was the only movement that had people of all races working together. Nobody else had that.

**DP:** Were you a member of the Party?

**IM:** I was a member of the Party, yes. Not that I didn't have my sharp differences with the Party. The Party did require you to abandon your religious faith, the Party did require you to .. well, it was very interesting, because ... you know, what was happening at the time, Michael Scott was the first churchman to join us, and the church disowned him. So the churches were not prepared to stand with us.

**DP:** Is this on passive resistance?

**IM:** Passive resistance, yes. The Catholic Church was merrily carrying on its segregated schooling in Natal, that didn't bother anybody. And we were raising these fundamental issues at that time and the churches were not standing on non-racialism. The universities were not standing with us. Natal University was ... by the time the Nats came into power, that only led to murmurings of a liberal resurgence, which didn't exist. Alan Paton wasn't there, the universities were not there. It was only when the Nationalists appeared to be a threat to white interests that you had a bigger reaction against them.

**DP:** What sort of person was Michael Scott? He sounds an extraordinary fellow.

**IM:** Extraordinary ... individualistic, in a way. He was in India. He was the secretary to the Bishop of Bombay. He came one day and said, I have got this - all loose money, but it was the exact amount - for a ticket to go to the UN. It had been **[forwarded]** from the Herero in South-West Africa. **[indistinct]** So I - none of us had cars in those days, you see. Normally - I mean, students never had cars, but even the Congress itself didn't have one single car. But there was a person who was a traveller whose car we could use - Maulvi Cachalia, we used to use his car, Yusuf didn't even have a place to stay - you know, we were all battlers. Yusuf was financially in a very poor position. So I 'phoned this man to say now look, Michael Scott is leaving and you are to see him off at the plane. he said alright. Then I 'phoned a number of people to say look, let's give this fellow a send-off just to show he's going on an important mission. The first group to take up the question of Namibia was COD.

**DP:** Is that why he was going?

**IM:** That's why he was going. So we had about 22-odd people to come and see him off. On the way to the airport he said, Ismael, don't you think I'll require a few pounds? I said, Michael, how much you're going with? He said nothing, just the ticket! I said, how can you go with just a ticket! **[laughs]** That was typical of Michael. So we got there, and I went round to everybody and said now look, I've got ... I think ten shillings or something was all I had. I managed to get 78 pounds from people present. I said Michael **[bangs table for emphasis]**, here's 78 pounds. What happens then is your business! And that's how he left. There was another trip on which we sent him first to



Rhodesia, and then from there to go further. We had given him a code name **[sounds like Masi]**, which is an Indian word for "father". So he sent an areogram: "cannot go further, problem". He was supposed to go to London then. So we were very amused with this and said no, he will handle it, he's a resourceful person. So we sent him a telegram: "reach destination, walk if necessary!" **[laughs]**

**DP:** Was he going to London at that time?

**IM:** Yes. He got there eventually. But ...

**[end of side one]**