



EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ARCHBISHOP DESMOND TUTU

May 13, 2006
Williamsburg, Virginia

Interviewers

Stephen F. Knott
James Sterling Young, chair

Index: page 9

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TRANSCRIPT

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May 13, 2006

Young: We have a very limited time and you have another place you must be and you have a very busy time obviously.

Tutu: I'm afraid I have to agree with you.

Young: Yes, yes. So we'll do the best we can. There are really three things that we thought, from a historical point of view, would be very interesting to hear you talk about for the sake of history. This project is for future generations; it's not for books for us.

The first is the trip, Senator Kennedy and his family's trip in January of '85. You invited him. We'd like to hear from you about how you came to meet Ted Kennedy and how the idea of this trip came about, that's one area.

The second is the trip itself and the most memorable or remarkable things that happened from your point of view during that trip, whether it's the arrival at the airport, the departure, and so on. We'd like to hear from you what you consider to be the historically really important things and just finally, the significance of that trip from your point of view; what happened, what effect did it have, what impact did it have perhaps within South Africa internationally, U.S./South Africa relations. But it's your story basically, so what you would like to talk about is what we would like to hear about.

Tutu: Yes. Well, I don't actually know when I met him, when I first met him. I don't recall now. It probably would have been on one or other of my visits to Capitol Hill, but I am not certain. It seems like I've known him actually forever, you know, and with the kind of name he has, you sometimes think that you've known public figures for a long time when in fact your acquaintance is from media and things of that kind. I don't know when I first met him, but October, 1984, would have been about the time when the Nobel Peace Prize had been announced. I think we were in Eritrea. There is something called the Robert Kennedy Fund or something.

Young: You know, I think the Nobel Prize award in Oslo was in December of '84.

Tutu: Yes, but I mean the announcement. The award is announced in October. The actual ceremony in Oslo is December 10.

Young: I think you were at General Theological Seminary.

Tutu: Yes, yes.

Young: And then serious discussions about a visit. You had had meetings with Kennedy.

Tutu: Yes. At a lunch, I think we talked about Robert Kennedy's 1966 visit and the incredible impact that had made. One of the major newspapers—it doesn't exist any longer, it was killed off by apartheid—the *Rand Daily Mail* characterized it as a gust of fresh air into a room that is closed and dank. I think I was with the members of the family, Ted's family, probably Ethel [Skakel Kennedy], and said it would be a good thing for a return visit of the Kennedys to South Africa because it was so crucial to keep the apartheid situation on the agenda of the world, and especially the United States because the [Ronald] Reagan administration had this policy of constructive engagement and they were very firmly set against the sanctions.

Of course I did this on my own lonesome, not having consulted anybody. When I went back home, Dr. Allan Boesak, who, as you know, was in the forefront of the struggle, concurred with me, but I wasn't smart then and didn't maybe consult sufficiently around. So when he arrived in January, AZAPO, the Azanian People's Organization, which at the time was very virulently anti-American and anti-capitalism, were opposed to this visit. They had this demonstration at the airport, about 40 of them, but there was clearly a kind of collusion between them and the apartheid authorities because this was grist to their mill that there should be these differences between us.

Of course Ted was not exactly a blue-eyed boy with them and so any embarrassment that happened to him would be one in the eye for him and something that they could celebrate. So they would allow—generally you were not allowed to have demonstrations in the airport, but they would allow it and the media had a field day. [laughter] There was a wonderful contrast because his first night in South Africa he spent in a black township, as they were in Soweto. Quite unusual and in fact it was breaking the law for him to do that. There was a very warm reception for him. There were about 500 or so people with candlelight.

Young: Where did that happen?

Tutu: Outside my house.

Young: Outside your house. So he spent the first night with you.

Tutu: He spent the first night. It was a very symbolic thing. I mean, the authorities must have been bristling quite a bit. [laughter] And then, he and his entourage spent a week going around the country, and one other significant visit was to Winnie Mandela.

Young: Yes, could you tell us about that? You were with him of course on that visit.

Tutu: No. Well, I don't know. Don't ask me too many questions. I have too many senior moments. I think she was already in Brandfort. She was banished actually to Brandfort, which is about 400 miles from Soweto, and put in a township where the people spoke a language she didn't understand, and they thought this was a way to break her spirit. But very quickly she acculturated. She was quite remarkable really. He went and that was another very significant—I mean, just to have gone to her was nailing his colors quite clearly to the mast. He also did go and see Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, who certainly was not too enamored of our own particular position about sanctions. And also he spoke to, addressed, American business—

Young: Yes, he met with some.

Tutu: The business community, yes.

Young: Also the U.S. Ambassador, who lectured him. Everybody would lecture him.

Tutu: That what he was doing was not kosher.

Young: Yes, exactly.

Tutu: It is a tragedy I mean, when you look back and see some of the things that people found unacceptable. Then the climax—this was going to be on the last day of his visit—was going to have been this rally in Regina Mundi. Regina Mundi, as you probably know, well, you could say was a site of the struggle in Soweto. Most of our rallies were held in this Roman Catholic Church, especially commemorations of June the 16th. So it was a venerable venue and it was packed out with over nearly 3,000 people in the church. There were about 100 or so AZAPO people who came to disrupt, saying “Kennedy go home” and things of that kind.

I asked at the meeting whether they wanted to hear the Senator and overwhelmingly they said yes. In fact, some were so incensed with the AZAPO people that they wanted to take them on physically. There was a very strong police presence outside. I was quite devastated really. I was scared that the nature of the altercation inside, if these people actually manhandled the AZAPO activists, we would be giving a chance to the police to step in, and it was such a horrible thing to have them stepping in to separate people who were claiming to be on the same side. Very reluctantly I said no, I think it would be better for him not to speak and have a disrupted meeting. It was an awful moment for most of us, but he was very gracious.

I did want to say too, I think in 1990 or so we went to stay at Hyannis Port. We went to stay at Robert Kennedy's and then later on Ted and the family arrived. We went sailing. But the thing that I do want to underline is it was a very touching thing. His mother was still alive but bedridden. He took me to meet his mother and I get so upset when the general media are negative about some of the things that have happened, and I say no one—maybe because no one knows about it but no one has reported. Of course, he would sit by his mother and they would be singing Irish ditties together. And then he would spend time reading to his mom. I mean, it isn't something that you could have called up and said yes, I may have made mistakes but I also am a good son to my ailing mother, and I would want that to be put down as one of the things that I'd

want to say about him, that he had proved to be a caring and a loving son. Now, what else did you want?

Young: Well, we don't have to end right now. Very soon, but the speech at the Regina Mundi Church, that was the last speech he was going to give before leaving, and it was supposed to be a really stirring speech. I don't know whether you ever saw that, the text of it or not.

Tutu: No.

Young: But I think the prospect that you spoke of, of violence, he has had many encounters with violence in his life, and his family have. He has been stoned by people who were against his stand on segregation busing in Boston, but I'm sure to have that last visit, the last part of the visit and have violence break out would have been too bad.

Tutu: I think really the apartheid dispensation made a lot of mileage out of the conflict between ourselves and AZAPO. And said here is a person who tries to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries and here is a radical group that does not support a party but has also said it didn't want him. So it was actually a very sad moment. Yes, they made a lot of mint out of it.

Young: He went to Pollsmoor Prison to see Nelson Mandela and he didn't get to see him. Do you remember that, outside the prison?

Tutu: No.

Young: Well, this is Greg Craig. We talked to Greg Craig, who was on the trip and who was his main staff person to help him out with the South African trip. We understand from Greg that this is what happened. He had expressed the wish to the government to visit—and check me on this, Steve, if I'm right—and the government said we will give you permission if you will renounce violence in a public statement. He was torn about this and he asked you what he should do. Now do you remember it?

Tutu: No. *[laughter]*

Young: Oh my goodness me. I'm not supposed to tell the stories.

Tutu: It's nearly 20 years, you know.

Young: Well, but he has—

Tutu: He has memories.

Young: —an elephantine memory. When he asked you if he should sign the renunciation of violence in order to see Nelson Mandela, you said no. You said, "You have asked to see him, they have told you no and that's your answer, don't sign anything." Well, this is very embarrassing.

Tutu: No, no, don't worry. I mean, you've got someone here who would make a very bad witness in the court. Incredible actually you know. Well, he mustn't feel so. They didn't allow *me* to see Nelson. They refused. I mean even when I was Archbishop and he was just next door and I said I would like to go in and see him, they wouldn't. Although eventually they let me go to Pollsmoor.

Do you remember when there was a hunger strike? They wanted me to go and appeal to the prisoners, or the detainees. I said, "You guys refused when I was wanting to come here and now you're looking for—" I did go after that. I did go talk to the people but this is something else. I am just saying that he was not in too bad company having been refused.

Knott: Father, could you talk a little bit about the impact that the visit had, both within South Africa and perhaps in the international community?

Tutu: Well, there was a lot of coverage, especially I think the sort of negative aspect of having a group that was opposing him. But there was no question at all about the fact that it kept the South African issue alive in the international community. The fact that so many of the blacks received him warmly was saying that for us it was a crucial symbol of the fact that the world had not forgotten us, and that we had significant allies such as he. One can't obviously compute what effect it had on our morale. I mean, I couldn't say to you that we were at that level and then after his visit—but it was a very significant boost for our morale, especially at a time when there was President Reagan, there was Mrs. [Margaret] Thatcher, who were very clearly firmly set against sanctions. They were supporting the apartheid dispensation, and many of the foreign companies were as well.

The very best that most of them tended to do was to follow the Sullivan Principles, and we kept trying to point out that we didn't want apartheid made comfortable. We didn't want our shackles made slightly more comfortable, which is what the Sullivan Principles tended to do. They were ameliorative rather than seeking to change things radically, and we said now, our greatest ambition was not sharing toilets with white people. The Sullivan Principles would say that those facilities should be made available. That was not what we were looking for. We were looking for political change, radical change where we would have a significant say in the running of our country.

But there is no question at all, I mean, that the effect on the oppressed was very significantly to say, here is an important member of the establishment and he has taken the trouble to come here. It gave us a very significant boost, and you could then say on the white community on the apartheid government, the effect would be the opposite. The fact that they colluded with AZAPO indicated that they wanted to subvert any significance that he might have had, because if he had been a nonentity they wouldn't—AZAPO almost certainly would not have been allowed to do what they did, and they would not really have cared what he did or didn't do. But they knew that you could not just treat him as if he were an insignificant person really. He is a very important person in his own right but also carried this name, which had its own significance.

Young: Yes, he was carrying on the work in a sense and carrying forward the work that his brother Bobby had started when Bobby became a Presidential candidate or even when he was

Attorney General and then got very much involved in the civil rights struggles in the United States. I believe that Ted and Bobby both had this feeling of your country and their country as having gone through much of the same struggles. There seemed to be a great deal of empathy. Was that reciprocated in South Africa, that feeling of empathy with him among—?

Tutu: Yes. I would say undoubtedly, because although we kept saying that there were very significant differences between our struggle and the civil rights struggles, there were very many points of convergence. We used to sing, “We Shall Overcome.” Martin Luther King, Jr. and many of the things that he did resonated very much with us. And the fact that the Kennedy clan identified so very closely with the aspirations of those who were involved in the civil rights movement was important for us, and that is part of why he did have this weight, shown not only by the reception from most of us, but also by the treatment that he got from the South African government. Of course, I didn’t know that he’d had a lecture from his Ambassador. [*laughter*]

Young: And from the businessmen as well. Did you have any particular impressions? You mentioned visiting on Cape Cod, Hyannis Port, this was later. He brought a lot of his family over there—do you remember them?—when he came to South Africa in January of 1985. He brought both of his children.

Tutu: Wasn’t there one who—

Young: Yes, Teddy [Kennedy], that was Teddy, Jr. He had had cancer and lost a leg. Teddy was with him, that was one of his children.

Knott: Kara [Kennedy] was with him.

Young: Kara, his daughter, was with him, and two of his sisters. Ethel was with him and his sister, Jean [Kennedy Smith] who was going to become Ambassador to Ireland. Jean’s husband, Steve Smith, I believe was still alive at that time. Ethel Kennedy, Greg Craig, and a few others came.

Tutu: Ethel, yes, yes, because she came again with her children for the Robert Kennedy thing, yes.

Knott: Have you kept in touch with Senator Kennedy over the intervening years? Do you talk that often?

Tutu: Not often, but coming into the bedroom, there’s a vase of beautiful white roses with a note from him. He always signs himself, “Your friend.” I shouldn’t appear to be name-dropping, but I am a snob.

Young: Well, I haven’t seen it yet.

Tutu: I mean, I would have hoped that he would have run for President.

Young: He tried.

Tutu: Yes, but I think that the sort of family charisma and the kind of things that they represented, he would have represented perhaps more effectively than others.

Young: Well, he made a run for the Presidency in 1980 and he was running against Jimmy Carter, who was the President, for re-nomination and that failed. But it's very interesting that he pressed on with his same philosophy, his same policies, and he's one of the most respected and revered members of the Senate today. He's a very effective Senator.

Tutu: I'm very glad because as I say, why I was telling the story about him and his mom is that I get very deeply distressed when people seek to undermine another, for the fact that there are very few of us who do not have frailties. Well, I don't know whether I'm talking to Republicans or Democrats but I'll say my piece that it's very strange that your country should have sought to impeach your President for something that was private, that didn't cost lives. And then you have one who has lied and it's been shown that he has lied clearly and he's caused so many deaths. They're a strange people, very strange people. I like you, but I mean you are very strange.

Young: I'm discovering that all the time. I thought I knew my own people, but sometimes I feel I don't.

Tutu: Have we finished now?

Young: If you say so, we've finished. Thank you very much. Do you have a moment for a picture? Senator Kennedy said, "I don't want my oral history to be without Desmond in it. You go where it is necessary to do it and do it." We're very appreciative about that and we know he is too. Maybe some time we'll be coming to South Africa to do more because he made several trips to Africa and it's an important part.

Tutu: Well, now I think, despite all the strange things that are happening here, quite frequently, people I think use him as a gauge. If Ted is for something, people will assume that it is almost certainly OK.

Young: Yes, that's true, but he has his enemies also. If he says something, they know it's not good. People do that too.

Tutu: But I think around the world, like at home, or in other parts. If he is on a particular side, people will tend to say that that would be a side they themselves would have supported.

Young: Yes.

Index

Apartheid, 3-4, 6, 7
Azanian People's Organization, 3, 4, 5
AZAPO. *See* Azanian People's Organization

Boesak, Allan, 3
Busing, EMK and, 5
Buthelezi, Mangosuthu, 4

Carter, Jimmy, 8
Craig, Greg, 5, 7

General Theological Seminary, 3

Hyannis Port, Tutu, Desmond, visiting, 4

Kennedy, Edward M.
 and apartheid, 3-4, 7
 and busing, 5
 and Kennedy, Rose Fitzgerald, 4-5
 Presidential campaign, 7-8
 and Tutu, Desmond, 3, 7, 8
 visiting South Africa, 4-6

Kennedy, Edward M., Jr., 7
Kennedy, Ethel Skakel, 3, 7
Kennedy, Kara, 7
Kennedy, Robert F., 7
 and Tutu, Desmond, 3
Kennedy, Rose Fitzgerald, and EMK, 4-5
King, Martin Luther, Jr., 7

Mandela, Nelson, 5, 6
Mandela, Winnie, 3-4

Nobel Peace Prize, 2

Pollsmoor Prison, 5, 6

Rand Daily Mail, 3
Reagan, Ronald, 3, 6

Smith, Jean Kennedy, 7
Smith, Stephen Edward, 7
Sullivan Principles, 6

Thatcher, Margaret, 6
Tutu, Desmond
 and EMK, 3, 7, 8
 and RFK, 3