

## **ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH MR SIDWELL [PAPI] LEBAKENG SAILA**

(The interview was conducted by Khotso Pudumo with Mr S.L. Saila at 839 Panyane Street, Batho, Bloemfontein, on 30 July 2018. Please note the following: **Pudumo**: Interviewer; **Saila**: Interviewee; **Du Bruyn**: Observer. Unclear\inaudible speech is indicated by a question mark [?]. [Sic] in most cases indicates a grammar mistake made by interviewee. Text in brackets [ ] is added for clarity.) Please note that the interview was affected by Mr Saila's speech impairment caused by suffering from stroke.

**Pudumo**: What are your names and surname for the record?

**Saila**: Sidwell Lebakeng Saila.

**Pudumo**: Where and when were you born?

**Saila**: I was born in Bloemfontein on the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1959.

**Pudumo**: 1959, who were your parents?

**Saila**: ... [sic] Saila and Motlalepule Saila.

**Pudumo**: Who were your grandparents?

**Saila**: I can't remember them.

**Pudumo**: You can't remember, okay.

**Saila**: Yes.

**Pudumo**: Where did you spend most of your time? Where did you grow up?

**Saila**: It was here [Batho] but when I was growing up, when I was about 15 years old, I grew up at Mavincent's house.

**Pudumo**: Okay.

**Saila**: Yes, until I turned 20 then I decided to leave school and to do politics because it was banned in schools.

**Pudumo**: Okay.

**Saila:** Yes.

**Pudumo:** What can you tell me that touched you as you were growing up?

**Saila:** What touched me was the way I was living, life was difficult.

**Pudumo:** Yes, can you describe to me how difficult it was?

**Saila:** What I am going to be talking about is about my own parents. It was very difficult for my mother to buy school uniforms and other things for me to look like other children. My father could not afford it and they both decided that since he cannot provide his wife with money ... [sic] it did affect him until he passed away because of frustration from drinking.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** Yes, my mother then was hit by car...

**Pudumo:** I am sorry.

**Saila:** I was young when that happened.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** It happened when she went to that house, [interviewee pointing out to the house that his mother used to like to visit] it was a hit-and-run [accident] and after that she passed away.

**Pudumo:** Okay, papa, my condolence. Can I ask you, which stories do you remember that your parents told you as you were growing up?

**Saila:** My parents did not but I got to see that in school.

**Pudumo:** In school.

**Saila:** In school and then the way I saw those things and I asked myself the question: "why can't a black person live like a white person?" No man black people suffered and sometimes I would ask myself why do black people live like this and white people live like this, all because of apartheid.

**Pudumo:** Can you explain that?

**Saila:** It was because of apartheid, Boers at that time had money. When you went to town there was a steam train siren [evening curfew] that when it sounded...

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** ... You must be out of town.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** I asked myself, now, when these people dictate to us the time we were supposed to be in town and out of town because of apartheid. There were buses for black people and there were buses for white people. There were taxis for white people and taxis for black people.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** There were signs that were prohibiting you to enter where only white people are allowed to enter. It will be written on the sign in Afrikaans "Geen Blankes" [slegs Blankes]. Those were the things one saw and it was difficult then.

**Pudumo:** It was difficult.

**Saila:** So, you will find that those things would create hatred in you and you end up hating other people ... [interviewee was not clear on what he was saying]. When you talk about this, you bring up the past and I do not want to go mad.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** There was a time when my mom was going to work and I was here. My mother went to work with me, when we got to work, that was when I saw how life was like.

**Pudumo:** Life was difficult.

**Saila:** Black people were not treated well; a black person was beaten up by a white person. Then the other white people came in to help him beat that black person. Then I asked my mother, "what is happening here?" and my mother said: "no, you say that, you will get arrested".

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** So, that thing created hatred.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** As I was growing up and attending school in 1976 ... [sic].

**Pudumo:** Can I ask you which school did you attend?

**Saila:** I attended school of Sehunelo [Secondary School] and then I was banned from Sehunelo.

**Pudumo:** Why did they ban you from Sehunelo?

**Saila:** They banned me because of the Soweto uprising [1976] as I was talking too much in class. In those days you couldn't do politics, so the principal called me to the office and I told the principal too much. There was a newspaper called...

**Pudumo:** *The Friend*?

**Saila:** No, not *The Friend* it was called '*Post*' or *Sowetan*. I think it was *Post* or *Sowetan*.

**Pudumo:** Sowetan?

**Saila:** I don't know if it is, so what happened, Winnie Mandela, when her husband [Nelson Mandela] was in prison [Robben Island] here at home we would wear Nelson Mandela t-shirts stating: 'release Nelson Mandela' campaign.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** We wore those t-shirts, when Winnie Mandela was banned to Brandfort.

**Pudumo:** Brandfort, yes.

**Saila:** That one day when she had a case [court case] in Bloemfontein. we went to court to support Winnie.

**Pudumo:** At that time were you still a learner?

**Saila:** Yes, I was a learner but I wanted to support Winnie Mandela, you see.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** So, with our support for Winnie Mandela we did not know that we were not supposed to do that.

**Pudumo:** Which grade or standard were you doing at that time?

**Saila:** Form One.

**Pudumo:** Form One?

**Saila:** Yes, I did not know at that time, that I was not supposed to support Winnie.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** So, when the police came, there at the court ... [sic] we then had to run away to the location.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** Unfortunately before then when Winnie came to court we followed after her. You see, the newspapers took photos and I was not aware, the next day when people bought the newspaper I appeared in it. So, some people came to tell me: "hey man, did you see yourself in the newspaper?" I said: "No, let me see". There was that photo.

**Pudumo:** It got you into trouble.

**Saila:** It got me into trouble; the police came to look for me. Then I asked myself as the police came to look for me and they came here in five or six cars looking for me. They came only for me and it was as if I had murdered someone and they wanted to take me to prison because of the photo that was taken of me behind Winnie.

**Pudumo:** Just because of the photo.

**Saila:** Yes, because of it.

**Pudumo:** Now, coming to politics, what were you told about politics in school, teachers did they teach about politics? Or was that among you as learners at school?

**Saila:** No, we spoke about it as learners, sometimes no one will tell you what you know, right? Let us say you know how to make *pap* [maize porridge] and no one will come and say they are going to teach you how to make it. So what happened in Bloemfontein it also happened in South Africa, everyone knew it. But when you say something about it, you were told you are wrong.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** One had to keep quiet about what was happening, just keep quiet and if you talk you will end up going to prison. You understand?

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** You understand? ... [sic] we are speaking from experience and we suffered, we black people, you see. The way we lived and how our parents struggled, it was difficult.

**Pudumo:** Yes, now how did the news of Soweto uprising affect you? How did it inspire you?

**Saila:** The news of Soweto affected us children of Bloemfontein in the following way during their boycott of 1976. They boycotted Afrikaans [Bantu Education] because subjects in school were done in Afrikaans, like accountancy.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** Accountancy is a subject that requires you to think a lot and during those times we did not call it accountancy. It was called '*rekeningkunde*'... [sic], [interviewee laughing].

**Pudumo:** Yes, papa.

**Saila:** It was a problem especially the learners who did not understand and were not used to school at those times. Imagine starting in a school and you do not know *rekeningkunde* in Afrikaans and it is one of your subjects, and it would be difficult for you to pass that subject. That was in the 1970s.

**Pudumo:** So the uprising in Bloemfontein, you are saying it happened in 1977?

**Saila:** Yes.

**Pudumo:** What happened in 1980? Because I heard that...

**Saila:** 1980, 1980 there was school boycott. Vula Masango School started first.

**Pudumo:** Vula Masango, yes.

**Saila:** Vula Masango, it started first, all the other schools became busy now and they supported Vula Masango [school] and then some schools were closed and Sehunelo [school] was also closed and Moemedi [school]. They were closed for the whole year, not just closed; they closed for the whole year.

**Pudumo:** How was it like in Bloemfontein at that time, when the schools were closed?

**Saila:** It was a mess, a mess. When you go outside your house police are there and streets are closed, it was a mess.

**Pudumo:** Which student was shot? I heard that there was a student who was shot by the name of Papi Makotoko?

**Saila:** He was murdered and shot by police.

**Pudumo:** I heard that he was the Hector Peterson of Bloemfontein?

**Saila:** Yes, he was Hector Peterson of Bloemfontein. He was the first one to get shot and died, after Papi was shot that caused the situation in Bloemfontein to get worse. We went to the funeral; the police were there at that funeral.

**Pudumo:** Can you please tell me about the funeral, what happened?

**Saila:** There were school learners at that funeral, and the police were there and they are the ones who started these things. Even if there were no learners who disturbed the police, the police would use teargas at the funeral. They shot the teargas at the people who attended the funeral.

**Pudumo:** I heard that Mandela's daughter was there to represent her father, who was it Zenani or Zinzi?

**Saila:** Yes, Zenani was there because they [Zenani and Winnie] lived in Brandfort. But I did not see her here in Bloemfontein [Zenani Mandela]. I think she was here because they stayed in Brandfort.

**Pudumo:** Brandfort.

**Saila:** But let me say I did not see her here.

**Pudumo:** In Bloemfontein.

**Saila:** Yes, but I did not see her and you know they were those people that the police were looking for.

**Pudumo:** Now, did you complete your schooling?

**Saila:** No, I did not complete my schooling.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** I did not complete my schooling because of these things of politics and I had to go to Gauteng with this girl from Gauteng.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** So, when I went to Gauteng it was to attend a funeral of a comrade.

**Pudumo:** Where did you operate, here [Bloemfontein]?

**Saila:** Yes, here in Bloemfontein ... [sic] he[comrade] stayed in the third house, Bokkie's home. That is where the meetings were held there.

**Pudumo:** Were you an underground operative or just an active member?

**Saila:** Let me explain to you, meetings were held, so I would be walking with Sammy [friend]. So, when I went to a meeting there, the aim for that meeting was that there was something that the councillors didn't agree with.

**Pudumo:** Blockmen?

**Saila:** Yes, Blockmen, they did not like something because they agreed with boers on everything, you see?



**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** They agreed with Boers and we said, no man, these councillors they do not stand up for us, they stand up for the Boers because they had money. So, we decided in that meeting to separate ourselves: those that stay in Bochabela, Botshabelo, etc., different comrades, we decided on a certain date that we were going to burn councillors' houses.

**Pudumo:** Wow.

**Saila:** We organized petrol.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** Petrol for petrol bombs.

**Pudumo:** Wow.

**Saila:** Yes, so we decided at a certain time, each person from different areas...

**Pudumo:** Their different stations [places].

**Saila:** Different stations had their own councillors.

**Pudumo:** Now, were all the councillors bad or were there good councillors as well?

**Saila:** They were all the same, because it seemed like there at the offices of the municipality they listened to Boers and they would respond by saying "*Ja, Baas*" "Yes, Boss". You see, and then we decided that each person burns a house.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** So, that day when we were supposed to burn councillors' houses ... [sic] we decided to start at 11pm at night. Now the moment we went, Sammy went out and others went out to their councillors. Then when we each got there, there were police already there. I think there was an informer for the police who told them the plans from the meeting. So, this informer from the meeting took our information to the police. So, the police, when they heard about that they became stupid and came with the vans from the police station and they came with guns.

**Pudumo:** Guns.

**Saila:** They [the policemen] took guns and went to the councillors' houses. We realised that there is information that has been leaked and we tipped each other off that we should cancel the thing.

**Pudumo:** Tipped each other off.

**Saila:** That we should not go to the councillors' houses, because the police were going to shoot and kill them.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** Then it did not succeed.

**Pudumo:** It had to be cancelled.

**Saila:** Now, the police got the information and everyone that attended that meeting were going to burn councillors' houses. Their names and information, the police received them, and started attacking each and every person who were at that meeting.

**Pudumo:** Wow.

**Saila:** You see? They [the police] attacked all of us. So, when you are taken to prison you are taken to...

**Pudumo:** Same place [prison].

**Saila:** Yes, one would be placed in this one and the other in that one and they made sure that they split them up.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** They made sure that we were not together [the people who were arrested, who were at that meeting to burn councillors' houses].

**Pudumo:** Yes, yes.

**Saila:** You see, it was during that time that ... [sic].

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** They had planned.

**Pudumo:** So, you were also arrested?

**Saila:** Yes, they arrested us.

**Pudumo:** Detention?

**Saila:** Detention...

**Pudumo:** Detention without trial?

**Saila:** Yes, I was there for six months. Their aim was to give us five years prison sentence.

**Pudumo:** So, which prison where you placed in?

**Saila:** They were different [prisons]. I was in a farm prison.

**Pudumo:** They did not take you to Ramkraal Prison?

**Saila:** No, there were some who were taken to Ramkraal Prison, but remember we were many. They put one in Ramkraal, they put one in the prison farm, just like that.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** So, Sammy and I were put in the farm prison but not in the same cell. One was in his own cell alone... [sic].

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** So, I want to tell you how I escaped the 5 years prison. So when I was in prison there were people who were already arrested and I was locked up with them... [sic]. They looked for someone and I asked the guys that were locked up with us if I can pretend to be that person the police were looking for. We changed clothes, I gave him mine and he gave me his. When the police took me, I was wearing the other person's clothes because I noticed that the wardens were instructed to release a man who wore certain clothes, you see?

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** So, unfortunately I had changed clothes. That person who was instructed to release the person did not know.

**Pudumo:** Your clothes that you wore.

**Saila:** Yes, now the person who got released was the one who wore my clothes and that person was arrested for carton [beer] [interviewee laughing].

**Pudumo:** [Interviewer laughing].

**Saila:** That person was arrested for possessing cartons and he had been there for a while in prison.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** They were going to release me to go start the five years sentence. They took the person who wore my clothes and that person wasn't me. The police did not have a case anymore and they released me to go home.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** After six months.

**Pudumo:** Six months?

**Saila:** Yes.

**Pudumo:** Can you tell me how did you survive day to day during the struggle days?

**Saila:** We went to meetings, now and then; we would go where we were needed like at funerals, we would go there.

**Pudumo:** Now, the meetings where were they held besides at that house you mentioned?

**Saila:** The meetings were also held at schools.

**Pudumo:** At school?

**Saila:** Yes, at school.

**Pudumo:** What about at churches or sports grounds?

**Saila:** No, no.

**Pudumo:** Can I ask you the last question, here...

**Saila:** And also the meetings were held in Bochabela at this guy's house, he was *The Friend* newspaper reporter. I always attended meetings at his home... [sic]. What is this guy's name, Moroe?

**Pudumo:** Morwe?

**Saila:** Yes, yes Morwe. The police did not know that we held meetings there, they found out later when they sent their informer.

**Pudumo:** Now, again what happened to informers when the people found out about that person? When you found out that the person was a spy?

**Saila:** Other comrades would deal with them... [sic]. Most knew informers but at that time they needed proof that the person was an informer before they could deal with them.

**Pudumo:** Okay.

**Saila:** Yes.

**Pudumo:** Now, in meetings what was discussed like to burn councillors' houses?

**Saila:** No, the counsellors' one it was at that time.

**Pudumo:** In the meetings you had at school, what was discussed? How to continue with the armed struggle?

**Saila:** We discussed school stuff ... [sic].

**Pudumo:** Okay, papa. Can I ask you the last question? Do you see it as important to have these kinds of interviews to record history so that people can know about Batho's history?

**Saila:** I do not think there is a necessity right now because we fought for the children to be free and they are free now. Children of these days are born free. For us during our time we were not living the way they are living, so we fought for freedom.

**Pudumo:** Yes.

**Saila:** You understand?

**Pudumo:** So, now...

**Saila:** I am happy and free... [sic]. Everyone is free now, we are happy. Our children are able to go to school and enrol for schooling for free.

**Pudumo:** Yes, thank you so much papa.

**Saila:** Thank you.