

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

SINDIWE MAGONA

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Ms. Magona.]

Q: Tell me where you're from, your background, your education? Tell us about that.

MAGONA: I was born in Tsolo, it's about 12 miles from Umtata, a well known place. I came to Cape Town at the age of five. Started school here in a place called Blouville, in Retreat. It was very much like the Crossroads in the 80's, an area demolished during a dispute. That's where I went to primary school, then I went to high school, where I had to travel two hours both ways. That was the only high school in the Cape for Africans. But because there was no training facilities for Africans, you had to leave the Western Cape because it was designated a colored provincial area. So we couldn't train here, and I went to the Eastern Cape again to do a two year teacher course. The Indians and whites, of course, had to matriculate in order to move on after high school. The blacks did not, we had a special exemption. With something that was called a junior certificate, you could do a teacher training. When I started my course, there was a part that was being phased out that required less and less schooling in order to do teacher training, but again, that was only for Africans. These programs were available anywhere except in the Western Cape. We trained in the Eastern Cape because the language was easier to understand than most part of the country.

Q: What part specifically of the Eastern Cape?

MAGONA: St. Matthews College, which is in Keiskammahock.

Q: This was a college meant for Africans and it was the only available place?

MAGONA: Most of these schools were set up by missionaries, this was Anglican. But the government eventually took over all the church schools and destroyed them. They were centers of excellence, if you know anyone whose anyone in South Africa and he's black, they went to one of these schools. From Mandela to Thabo and Desmond Tutu...

Q: Did you benefit from being there at this time?

MAGONA: Yes, I learned discipline, things you couldn't learn at home. Then those schools tried to acculturate Africans into white society. It pains me now to be with teachers who can sit at a table and not know what to do. We don't come from homes,

especially people my age, but most African homes, and the people in the minority in South Africa; we don't come from a society where people sit at table, so we don't know manners, or table manners. In the boarding schools, we were trained in the white society. Sooner or later the idea was that we had to get out of the ghettos and work with everyone.

Q: The acculturation sometimes implies patronizing, but in this case you feel it provided another option.

MAGONA: It equipped me with knowledge, skills, and "know how". So when I'm in the other world I have some way to know what to do with myself. You need to know the norms, so when you need to decide, you can make a conscious decision and not fumble around about it. The study habits that you cannot get from home. Parents with all good will may say, "Study, work hard at school", but if they haven't gone through it, they don't know what it means. You cannot have a blind person leading the blind; you need a half sighted person to lead the blind. The parents who have never been to high school or other education, they have no idea on how to guide their kids, they rely on their kids willing to be hungry enough to do. But guidance implies slightly more so you can say you need hours of this and hours of that, maybe less TV and less playing around outside.

Q: Being at a boarding school was an advantage?

MAGONA: Yes, a distinct advantage. My last job in South Africa was teaching at Herschel Girls High. Even for whites, that was where the crème de la crème went. Before my time, Harry Oppenheimer's children went there. During my time, Raymond Ackerman's children were there. To see these white kids, to see the discipline of the teachers, that was my finishing school, the real thing, well equipped. When I first arrived, I had known there was a difference, but we had no idea what it meant or what it was. In terms of structure, infrastructure, ways of teaching. When I was there, I was with a teacher doing undergraduate studies. We met a white student to meet for a group discussion, we go past a school in Cape Town and this woman couldn't believe it was a high school. It was so large she thought it was a university.

Q: Did the system ever claim separate but equal?

MAGONA: This was it, apartheid, separate but equal. In the mid-80's the government was spending \$480 a year, \$280 a year, and \$28 a year. It was \$280 for colored, \$480 for white, \$28 for black, per student. You can Google it, I knew it then. I used to give talks, \$480, \$280, \$28. When I see the mess our parliament makes, I say, "how can I expect better." This has nothing to do with corruption, but when people have no skill or ability to perform, look at the training they did. It was horrible. We were bonsai by apartheid, so programs like these; it's like taking someone out of hell. This is how it is to live normally, yes some of us had to go back but that reprieve gave you a chance to see what you might have been. I write for who I am, not what they were trying to make me. I am me. After teacher training, I got a job in April 1962. Between 1961 and 1966, I had an amazing brilliance to produce three children. With the second pregnancy, I thought I should get married, with the third pregnancy, he thought he should run away. I was 23, he

was 25 and a migrant worker. He had no rights to be here with me, and between the two of us, we had no rights to the house where we lived. You're going to fall in love but then I couldn't enter into contract for a house. African women were minors, you were either your fathers daughter, husband's wife, or your son was your sponsor. Africans could never own immovable houses, we always had to rent.

Q: How did you live?

MAGONA: We lived in my mother and father's house, sometimes 16 of us at a time. Have you heard of mansions? You can see the government building them all over. Looking back, that was stroke of misfortune, my husband leaving me. I wouldn't be sitting here if he had not left. I had to stop and try and remember I had a brain, and use it. Here I was with a tenth grade education, two years of teacher training, and three children, so therefore among the things I was not able to do was access welfare. I wasn't a citizen, I couldn't go and say my children are starving, I have no money, I'm not working, and you are no business of the government.

Q: It couldn't have been easy. But you had to develop quickly.

MAGONA: I had to distinction of having semi-literate parents, a great set of parents. They took their role of parenting as a religious undertaking. As a child, I didn't always appreciate this. I often wanted to trade them in for a better set of parents. I couldn't understand what I had done to God even before I was born for him to punish me like this. (Laughter) They were so strict; they always wanted to know my business. How irritating... but looking back, I couldn't have asked for a better set of parents. After my husband left, my role as a parent became something that angered me. Now I didn't have this myth of a man who would look after me and my children.

Q: Any idea what ever happened to him?

MAGONA: Yes, we're coming to him. When I arrived in Somerset to have my third child, the stupid doctor told me I was having twins. It ended up not being twins; this was a time before x-rays so he was guessing. He was wrong and the third child was a boy. When he was six months, I got a teaching job again. I lost the first job after I got pregnant with the first child. After that I spent four years doing domestic work including a job where they wanted a live in maid, but they had no room. So I slept in the garage, with the cars. I needed a job and the women needed a maid, so we made it work.

Q: So three children and you, in a garage? In what city?

MAGONA: Ottery

Q: Four years of that?

MAGONA: Yes, then I got a teaching job. With my first paycheck, I paid the Damelin Institute; I knew I needed that high school diploma. I knew it would make me attractive

to matriculate. I counted in the 12 or 13 schools, there were two or three who matriculated.

Q: So you could get it despite being black?

MAGONA: Yes. It was a correspondence, they have schools everywhere. In two years, I had a certificate. I couldn't believe it, of course then I became attractive. Principals were asking me to come here and teach or go there and teach. I wanted a scholarship to go abroad. Overseas to me in the 70's meant England. So I did A level correspondence at the University of London. I was teaching and studying at the same time, I had to work for my children. I had no alternative, I needed jobs, and I needed to better my qualifications so I would have some kind of security for the kids. In a way, it was because I had the kids to push myself. I think that's when I started UNISA, and hooked up with SACHED (South African Committee for Higher Education). It was an NGO that came into existence after the government segregated secondary education. If you were colored you couldn't go to some schools, unless you were doing things that the colored schools didn't have. When I started UNISA, I became a student at the same time. SACHED enabled us to do UNISA, a space to study, books to read on loan and each book was made to last two years.

Q: Who made SACHED? Who were these people?

MAGONA: People like Linda Wilson, Professor Frances Wilson's wife.

Q: Where did the money come from?

MAGONA: Overseas mostly, they would give you the money to enroll through UNISA then you paid it back over the years. Many of us who wouldn't have been able to afford UNISA were now able to. At SACHED I became truly South African. That's where I got to meet friends from across all the lines.

Q: UNISA was a correspondence school?

MAGONA: Yes.

Q: How did you meet people then?

MAGONA: Through SACHED, they offer you housing. To the side in the same building there was an office of the Black Sash, also a Christian Institute.

Q: This was a major change for you, how did people find SACHED and how did SACHED find people?

MAGONA: Mainly word of mouth. Very few people were studying then, so if you were studying, you got to know other people studying through word of mouth.

Q: So you matriculated, then got a BA and now at UNISA...

MAGONA: That's how I met people like Frank Sassman, he was the main person from the USIS, a librarian. Through him, I got to know the work of the United States Information Service.

Q: Was Frank Sassman involved with SACHED? What was his connection?

MAGONA: No, the connection was that Frank knew where people were studying. We would bring together groups from UNES and USIS to watch films and continue the education. He should be knighted, there are no knights in South Africa but he was a great man.

Q: He found you for me.

MAGONA: Also the way he did things. He treads softly, he's gentle but he gets things done, a real gentlemen. Today we forget what people like Frank did. He was very unassuming; he's not self facing and will always be humble.

Q: A level in London, BA in correspondence.

MAGONA: Yes but we had the riots during my BA. And I was teaching white kids... I was worried that my children would be able to have an education. My parents did the best they could and I was going to do the same. For an African of my age, to be self-sufficient and food secure is a major achievement, and until I die, I will always have food on the table. To be my age and know if my shoes are broken I can take them to get repaired, or take my clothes to the dry cleaning. But you know what; I have a fear of poverty in old age. It's the saddest thing you'll see, because when you're young you have the ability to change, but when you're old, what can you change? In my twenties, I got very tricky after my husband left. There was a kind of awakening, I started studying because I realized my life and what would become of it was up to me. If I was going to do it, it would have to be in spite of the government. Anything I did would give no thanks to the apartheid government, they didn't want me to become anything. I couldn't wait for change in South Africa, I needed my life to count for something and that's why I undertook education. I had three kids to raise, to educate and as you can see from the figures, we were the only population group whose education the government didn't fund. To be fair, they didn't force us to go to school, everyone else did. Until age 16 you were legally forced to attend school. This was a government that expressed its agenda for the African.

Q: But you were 80%?

MAGONA: Not we, the government didn't force us to go, even the children

Q: Despite all odds, you got your degree in UNISA during the riots...

MAGONA: I never got into the liberation talks or debate. I didn't know what it meant, what could liberation for me? It was tough because fingers were pointed at you, how dare you study? I was a sell-out to most people. I've never been able to "swim with the crowd." I was rejected by one side and suspected by the other side. I've never belonged to a political party, I had kids to raise. Later on when I could do as I please, I became suspicious of organizations that didn't allow me a voice. How could I put myself in these groups that say you can't do this or you can't do that? I voted two or three times, only with my conscious. We will have democracy eventually, when more of us stop voting sentiment and vote reality. Look at Zimbabwe, the people still vote for the group of people who say, "We gave you this freedom, we fought for it." The struggle for Africa is establishing democracy and the living with democracy. Democracy means we choose a few of us to go and do the work of the nation, our parliament. They are not our kings, they are our servants. They go to parliament and live in palaces and drive Porsche cars, they are not kings! The voters need to awaken to the idea that they hold the power, they need to put people in positions that will do their will.

Q: Has this not happened in South Africa?

MAGONA: No, people still vote with sentiment. The ANC freed us, Mandela freed us. When you have someone with vision and integrity you may vote with sentiment perhaps. But with someone who is not ideal or has no integrity, you need to separate yourself.

Q: You said Nelson Mandela has integrity, when did you learn that?

MAGONA: When he refused to come out of jail. He stayed in jail longer than he would have had he given in to the governments demands. His speech during trial when he said, "these are the principles for which I have fought, and my lord if it should happen for which I am prepared to die." Mandela is a man among men. If this country had any sense at all, forget the gifts and the money, the one real gift we could have given him was living our lives as the true rainbow nation with tolerance, forgiveness, and total acceptance. We wouldn't be busy changing the name of streets and towns. We would be building new schools, roads, and office buildings. I don't see the value in all the busy work changing names and such. We didn't send people to parliament to change street names; we sent them to change the texture of lived lives. People still die of starvation, people still drop out of school, people have babies in high school, and people die of AIDS and other unnecessary deaths. We have no universal health coverage and you're going to start with the names of streets? Our kids can't read, kids who cannot read will never study, and the schools have no resources.

Q: I'm impatient to get you to Colombia.

MAGONA: I saw a flyer on the library bulletin. I applied, and I get to be interviewed for this scholarship. Richard Reeves was in the committee who interviewed me, he said, "should you receive this scholarship, what will you do for you people when you get back?" I said, "You know, even if I could come back with a Master's degree, if people can look at me and say that woman, that mother, that grandmother has a Master degree,

which would be fine.” I wanted to be a role model. I enumerated I was in the women’s this and church this, I was in a lot of community organizations that was involved in raising awareness. My getting this opportunity and the ability to come back and tell these groups we can make it for the kids, the community, etc... Education was my weapon of choice.

Q: Many people from your area didn’t see it this way, you said earlier.

MAGONA: At the time of the riots, liberation before education. My point was, if you get this liberation, and you don’t have people with the qualifications, how are you going to run this government, how are we going to run our lives? Who will you be in the free country?

Q: You knew Frank Sassman, you were interviewed by a famous South African writer, and they challenged you but eventually accepted you.

MAGONA: I said even if I did nothing, the fact of a person who looks like them who the kids can go to and looks like their mother could do something. In my street there are a lot of people who’ve made it, and it wasn’t all me, but I made an impact by just being there. You need to be able to see dreams in order to achieve them. Dreams are like madness, their culture bound and unless more and more people do something so the growing people can see it we’ll be nothing.

Q: You went and got the masters and indeed this was an image yet to be developed and you developed it, you created a whole new awareness.

MAGONA: An awareness among people, I have a saying when I give talks, whether you choose it or not, you are a role model. People look up to you, even people you do not know, so we must be careful about what we say or what we do. I have to choose thing carefully to knowing people see me as a beacon, or someone who’s made it. I am someone escaped. So they need to see me do sensible things, like driving small cars to help the environment.

Q: The experience itself in Colombia. How did you get that place?

MAGONA: The education was top notch. I was going either to San Francisco or to the east coast somewhere. When the response came that I got the scholarship, I chose the east coast and finally Colombia. I’d seen the west coast and it reminded me of home.

Q: The Fulbright office in Washington found you the placement? You had the weight of the apparatus supporting you. Did you live near campus?

MAGONA: Yes, 113th street.

Q: Can you remember your first impressions?

MAGONA: The very first was, is there a convention of white people in this town? (Laughter) I didn't realize the rest of the world was not South Africa, I had never seen so many white people in one place at one time. It hadn't sunk in the first time I was in the states. Uptown and downtown demographics are very unique as well.

Q: It must have been different, dealing with white people in New York compared to Cape Town.

MAGONA: Yes, and if I saw a cop he didn't have to ask me for ID or anything like that. In Cape Town, you needed a pass wherever you were. Were you working? Where are you going? They could ask you anything.

Q: How long until you felt you were free of pass law?

MAGONA: It took some time but eventually I calmed down. I could walk anywhere, anytime. I lived in an international house for one month and I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I then went to Johnson House. When I came I didn't know what to do, school had not started yet, and I met a nice young women from Uganda, Erlin. The dean of admissions had asked her to help me get organized. The dean knew all the students very well and wanted to help everyone. Erlin was the president of the international students. She helped me solve all the logistical problems with moving to a new place. I've never lived alone, never slept in a room alone, the realization that I was in New York all by myself and if I didn't wake up the next morning, nobody would no and nobody would care. Erlin and I used to give each other a phone call to tell each other goodnight. I got introduced to things like half and half milk, needless to say it didn't take a year for me to balloon. (Laughter) I got so fat and I am short so I looked like a fool.

Q: What were some of the things in New York that you got to know?

MAGONA: The cloisters and I really enjoyed running. For about four months I wore the one black skirt I brought that I could fit in, and I said, "I'm not buying fat clothes."

Q: How did the academic program go?

MAGONA: That went well and I had a placement, it was with the New York Urban League. I went to the Bronx at 148th and Grand Concourse. It was sort of like an internship experience. It was community based work dealing with kids who didn't want to go to school and who didn't have anything to do, youth at risk. I did it three days a week and academics two days. We went to shelters, drug programs, housing programs.

Q: How did you deal with the problems?

MAGONA: The big lesson for me was that we had problems there with the government and the system. I learned that the right to vote was simply a stepping stone of democracy. Even living in a free society will mean very little for you if you chain yourself. All the social ills will haunt you.

Q: In the United States, were the problems you were facing due to the individual not being responsible?

MAGONA: Yes, also systems perpetuate themselves, that's the great learning of two years in the United States. People can be freed legally, but if... the first poem I ever read publicly by the way, the first poem is called "Fear of Change." Written toward the end of 1993, it's a poem that says I am happy.

Q: Could you read it?

MAGONA: You know I was happy but I had some trepidation because everyone knew there was change.

April 1994
With baited breathe we wait
At last we join the rest of progressive humanity.
Shall we sing and dance

Our cup truly overflowing?
Why then I am not overjoyed?
Frozen my heart
Shall I with you a secret share?
My biggest fear
What makes me tremble

I have seen the Promised Land.
Harlem, US of A.
The world has a memory swifter than a blink.
Give it a decade or two, if that.
That fast and full will clearly show.

Why are they not making it?
What's holding them back now?
After all, Apartheid is gone.
I have seen the thick, weltered scars on people
Rudely plucked from house and home.

Bound hand and bleeding foot
Kicked, punched, raped
Rubbished every way.
Killed in their millions and dumped on icy wave.

Today, those unlucky enough to survive the gruesome plunder
We can fall short of acceptance of society.
We have been left them with no tongue of our own.

All and all it was a good experience, if I had not gone to Colombia, I would not have applied to the UN where I spent ten years working in the End Apartheid radio programs. I was mainly a translator but later on I did both.

Q: You were in New York for ten years?

MAGONA: No, 25 years. I went in 1981 and returned in 2004. The first 10 years at the UN I did radio work. Between 1994 and 2004, I was in film archives.

Q: The theme of this discussion is education.

MAGONA: If you want to fight poverty, if you want to fight oppression, if you want to fight women's oppression by men, there is only one real key to freedom that is education. If you want to fight a government who doesn't perform, if you want to hold governments accountable, use education. Right now any government in South Africa would give houses for votes.

Q: Are you a South African who visited the US or are you American of South African origins or are you a person of the world?

MAGONA: I wish I was a person of the world; I am a South African who visited the states. Since I started writing, I've been very fortunate to do a lot of traveling. I was younger than 15, I hated learning about places I had never seen, but then when I got the scholarship I had a hard time finding the United States on a map. (Laughter)

Q: You're now in South Africa, since 2004, what did it mean to have those 25 years in New York. How has it changed your effectiveness as an educator in South Africa?

MAGONA: It made me aware that no life is a little life. Every life counts and I believe exclusively in what Eleanor Roosevelt said in the 40's, "We are here for one reason, to leave this place better than we found it." I am working for social transformation, as I said before, unfortunately, systems perpetuate themselves, and until such time South Africans work for social transformation, we will have the same order and the same lives will continue. There may be changes here and there, some people may look different, but for the masses, work will continue as usual. If the parents didn't get education, there likelihood is that the children will end up exactly the same. That to me is the true sadness.

End of interview