

Sundiata Acoli:

The Liveright Interview

First Interview

H: What work are you doing?

S: [I have] a janitor's job.

H: Put that message on there that you wanted to get on that you'd like to get on there about support on the outside.

S: My lawyer, Jill Soffiyah Elijah, is in charge of a project to make an application for a sentence reduction for me and I'd like people who are interested to contact -- The Sundiata Acoli Freedom Campaign, P.O. Box 5538, Manhattanville Station, Harlem, NY 10027 -- to find out how they can support the efforts and other ways they can contribute to helping to reduce my sentence.

H: We've talked to her on the telephone and she was helpful in helping us straighten things out here.

S: She's been very helpful to a lot of people with visiting problems.

H: She's a very able and committed person. Does she get out here?

S: From time to time but you see it's a long distance out here.

H: How about this? It's either legal or social or political or what? Do you get much....

S: Well, it's been my experience since I've been in the federal system -- I've been 10 or 11

years in the federal system and have done at least 6 years in the state system -- they normally, or so far, have only put my immediate family members on the visiting list and maybe one or two social visitors. I guess [they added the social visitor] just to round out the form. Being way out here in Kansas with my family being from New York City -- the East Coast -- and with my mother living in California, it's very difficult for them to find enough free time to be able to visit. So I'm lucky if I get a visit once a year, sometimes once every two years.

H: Really!? That's -- If there were more support groups, or people in the geographical range, do you think that the authorities would prevent you from getting more people on the list -- that you could see from time to time? I don't know how much it would mean to you but I guess it would....

S: Support? Yes, especially if it's a good degree of support. It always helps the situation better than a small amount.

H: That's depressing to think your visits are so few and far between.

S: As for social visits, I don't have any social visits, just family visits.

H: I'd like you to -- there are a whole lot of things I'd like to ask you about. Naturally, we've read something about your case and your situation but I'd like to know in your case what first motivated you to commit yourself to the movement; to commit yourself to helping to change

society in a better direction? If you can remember how you got....

S: Basically, just being Black in America. I don't know [any one particular event]. It seems most people, at first, seem to think there was one dramatic event which occurred, which so shocked and enraged me that henceforth I became an activist. But no, [it was] just the simple fact of being a Black person living in America, living under these conditions, and the fact that these conditions affect all Black people. So no, there was no one particular event.

H: Did you have any family background that led you to wanting to change things for your fellow human beings and particularly members of Black America?

S: Well, in other words, I was born and raised in a small town in Texas. My parents -- my mother was a domestic, my stepfather was a railroad worker. At that time in Texas most people -- you know they have a lot of oil and cattle in Texas, that's what they talk about most -- but they also have a lot of cotton and hay and alfalfa and a lot of farm work. Most farm work and other hard work is done by Black people.

My mother, during the cotton pulling season, cotton chopping season, used to take off from her domestic job in order to pull cotton to make more money for the family. Most Black women did this and also most Black men who didn't have steady jobs. My mother would take me to the fields with her when I was five years old. I couldn't do much work at that time but it was to avoid having to find a baby sitter. The point is that at five years old I was

waking up at five-thirty in the morning, catching cotton trucks, sitting -- riding 20 to 30 miles -- on the back of cold windy trucks to the cotton fields, helping my mother pull cotton -- and full cotton sacks get to be 60 or 70 pounds [for women, and up to 100 to 140 pounds for men]. You have to pull 'em down the cotton row for half a mile and pull 'em back [up the row for another half-mile], empty 'em and all that.

During this process I began to notice that only, or mostly, the hard work -- cotton pulling, cotton chopping, baling hay, and jobs like that were done by Blacks and Mexicans -- Chicanos, and that there were almost no White families doing this type of work. No matter how poor White families were, very few of them pulled cotton. But almost the entire Black community at some time other pulled cotton to supplement their incomes. [This was also true for Chicanos] and usually the Chicanos were migrant workers. They came from down in southern Texas and followed the cotton crops to Oklahoma, out through New Mexico, Arizona, and on out to California. Most of the stationary [non-migratory] drudgery work was done by Blacks.

Also just from that fact, when I started school I never went to school over 6 months out of the year because for three months we pulled cotton. Whereas White kids, in town, went to school nine months out of the year. They had big modern schools; they had chemistry labs, they had libraries, gyms. I went to a school that had about 12 rooms, one to each grade -- one through twelve. No gym, no lab, no library, no nothing. What I'm saying is that things like these were ordinary conditions that affected all Blacks. These were things that I began to realize -- and at the same time in the schools they were teaching us about justice, that this is

the land of the free, the home of the brave, right? Every boy can grow up to be President. But when I looked around at the Black community there were no paved roads, the roads and streets were all paved in the White community....

H: And no future President?

S: No Presidents, none at all. And the toilets in the Black community were on the outside in the backyard. In the White community the toilets were inside the house. Almost in every area there was a vast difference. Businesses, the only businesses in the Black community were barber shops, hair dressers, candy stores, the funeral parlor, and a few Black cafes. All other businesses were in the White area of town. So from these differences in growing up, and with the oppression that are visited on Black people -- and at the time I was being raised by my mother who taught me to always be proud that I was a Black boy, taught me to uphold justice, to love Black people, to respect myself, to fight for what's right, to stand up for what's right....

H: Did you have a religious background?

S: Yes, my mother raised us, me and my sister, in the Church of Christ. She also believed in the ten commandments, not to steal and all that -- so we were learning all this when what you saw in reality was something altogether different.

So basically, I was raised to respect myself and Black people and had a desire to change conditions for Black people -- for them to be able to control their own lives; to participate equally in society like any other people; to have basic

human rights, jobs --or rather decent jobs, food, and shelter, and stuff like that. And I felt it was impossible for me to maintain respect for myself unless I did something to help remove some of these oppressions from Black people through struggle in some form or another. These are basically the things that caused me to struggle. They're the same things that generally cause every other people to struggle.

H: You went from these early feelings into the movement?

S: Yes.

H: I'd like to ask you a question which is puzzling us as we met people in the movement. Particularly, well, almost all the people we've met, and that's the concept of the future of Black liberation in America but further than that, independence or autonomy -- and when the Puerto Ricans talk about this it's pretty definable. You have the island and it's been captured and they want to free it. You talk to the Irish and you have a British-occupied island, but it's a much more difficult process, concept, when you're dealing with Black liberation in America. I know when I was very young I was a member of the C.P. [Communist Party] and at the very beginning of my contact with the political movement in the country there was a definable -- whether it was correct or not is not the point, but there was the idea of independent Black south with five states. Well, you probably know better than I do what I'm trying to say. But is there today while the injustice is clear and the need for Black struggle or struggle for Black freedom among progressive people is -- the need is

obvious, the form that independence would take is difficult to define and it seems to vary from group to group. New Africans -- Black Liberation Army, etc. How do you see it? Can you define it? Do you think it's possible to define it?

S: I know what you're driving at. I've always felt that freedom -- people's ideas of freedom means a number of things, right? To me freedom is the right of people to control their own destiny, to control their own lives. And freedom means being without any external controls whatsoever. That's what freedom means.

Blacks, Africans in this country, have been enslaved by White society, and are dominated by White society. I don't think that they can call themselves free unless they are entirely free. In other words, to me the concept that Africans, or Blacks, can be free in this country is long past where they're required to maintain an association with this country; that's not real freedom.

When dealing with an oppressor the only way to be free is if you're free completely. Then you can decide whether or not you want to form an association with them or whatever. So that's why, to me, freedom means independence, so that African people in this country can decide of their own free will whether they want to maintain an association in the future with other people in this country or whether they want to go their own way. And I don't see how freedom can be anything without first that.

Therefore I advocate independence --and within this country's present borders -- as a Black Nation, because freedom includes our right to secede. That's freedom, and then what happens after that is decided among ourselves.

H: What tangible form would you try for? I'm still -- would it include separation?

S: In other words, land, free and independent -- separate land.

H: Alright, it would be based on land. It's a difficult concept.

S: OK, it may be difficult, but I think the difficulty is for the people in the dominate position, because I think that people get -- once people get used to dominating another for so long they begin to think that this is the normal state of affairs. And even a lot of progressive people take offence when people who have been dominated even think about separating from them. If you're looking at it from a dominating point of view, [it's difficult.] If you look at it from the view of a people who have been dominated and subjugated for five hundred years at least, it is not an unusual position for them to want to separate from a situation like that.

H: I find the land concept -- I don't say you and I have to decide at present -- so what would happen after freedom, expropriation of land? What land? Do you know what I'm saying? Enclave? I'm not asking you to decide....

S: Basically, it's the land African people inhabited when they first came to -- were brought into slavery to this part of America. It's the land that they lived on and worked on and died on, and or defended. This is the land that belongs to them. This is primarily the land in the South. The majority of Africans in this country lived in the

South -- were slaves in the South, and primarily they all lived in the South. It's impossible to ignore history even though now a number of Blacks have been dispersed from the South by force, by terror, by the Klan, by economic hardship, by industrialization, or looking for jobs, or any number of reasons. So that now Blacks also predominate in a number of cities. To me independence means land in the South, and it also means that in areas in the cities where Blacks predominate they should have some form or autonomy over that area and control of their lives in that area.

H: That defines it pretty much.

S: You see, one thing people don't seem to understand -- or they act like they don't understand -- is that 'democracy' for the minority group of people tends to be a dictatorship. In other words, we are a minority nationality within this country and what it means is that if you bring it down to a vote where one decides -- majority rules, right? Then African people in this country will always be outvoted, about the way their lives should be run, by a majority population which is right now predominately White. So while 'democracy' is good when you're the majority people, but when dealing with an oppressed minority, democracy itself is a dictatorship to the people in the minority. In an arrangement like that, African people in this country could never have real control over their lives, they'd still be dominated by the majority group. That's not freedom, especially for people who are oppressed and have suffered a long history of oppression. So the only way that African people can have real control over their lives, freedom for their lives,

is if they themselves determine how their lives should be arranged and what avenues they're going to take to try to achieve this. The only way they can do this is in a situation where only Black people decide.

H: That's very explicit. I'd like to know a little about, if you can tell us about your relations with the rest of the general population here. Do you have, are you able to discuss your ideas, or -- I don't know how you feel about wanting to, but do you communicate with each other or with the group of people who respect your aspirations, your sacrifices?

S: Leavenworth is that they call a general population prison, or in other words all prisoners, who don't go into lockup for punishment, circulate freely throughout the prison. By that I mean a general population prison. So therefore, I can circulate freely throughout the prison, I can circulate with whoever I want, and I can associate with other people. As for the number of prisoners' organizations, Leavenworth is pretty good. They have an African Cultural Society here, which is an organization. I can participate in that. They have a number of Muslim and religious organizations and from time to time I attend various services. There is the Nation of Islam, there's Orthodox Islam, and there's the Moorish Science Temple. Each organization, including the African Cultural Society, invites people to attend different functions where we get together and interact, and everyone gets along very well together.

H: You're not a member of any explicit Islam group, Muslim group, are you?

S: I'm not a member of any particular Islamic organization. From time to time I attend each of their meetings, particularly when they give functions or I'm invited or I just feel like dropping in to keep in contact.

H: Do you teach at all, or I'm trying to remember, Abdul [Aziz of the Virgin Island - 5] this morning mentioned that he does a certain amount of teaching with the Muslims...

S: No, I don't do any teaching. Some time, from time to time, the African Cultural Society will ask me to speak or to give a presentation sometimes.

H: What are the presentations? What type?

S: OK, I don't know, maybe it was about 6 months ago they had a -- they have different topics at different periodical meetings. Five or six months ago the topic, or area, of discussion was political prisoners so they asked me, Jaan [Laaman of the Ohio - 7], Leonard [Peltier of The American Indian Movement], and some others to give a -- each one of us to give a presentation or speech on political prisoners -- different areas of political prisoners. And we did that.

H: What was the reaction or non-political prisoners?

S: I think most of them were pleased but I think that moreso there was an -- [awakening]. They didn't know about political prisoners, in particular in relation to the [U.N.] Human Rights

Commission, human rights, and the right of people to self-determination; nor the different aspects of the rules and regulations that came out of the Human Rights Commission concerning an oppressed people's right to struggle against alien domination and racist regimes; nor the whole history of the U.N. and the push for national liberation by various nationalities and peoples throughout the world including the oppressed people in the U.S. Lots of them were pretty glad to learn this and I think they learned a lot.

H: Is there -- do you feel that there is any marked difference in this particular prison of treatment of political prisoners or the attitudes towards political prisoners on the part of the administration? Do they make a distinction between political prisoners and the general population? Is there a pattern that's discernable?

S: OK. Well, basically political prisoners get much longer sentences for the same offence than someone who is not political, and political prisoners usually are sent to the hole much faster for much longer time than someone who's not political.

Another thing is that Blacks in general serve more time for the same offence than Whites do. Now a Black political prisoner serves more time than the average Black, so that what you have is extra time serve on top of the longer sentences for other Blacks. It's a very extreme amount of time served under extremely hard conditions for political prisoners.

H: How does Leavenworth seem to stack up in terms of other high security institutions?

S: First I was in the New Jersey state prison system -- I've only been to Trenton State prison....

H: It's suppose to be a pretty horrible place.

S: Yes it is. After six years they forcefully transferred me to the federal system and when I came to the federal system I was sent to Marion, Illinois simply because of my political background. I was held at Marion for 8 years which was longer than most other prisoners have done in Marion. And then from Marion I came to Leavenworth three years ago. So my experience has been state prison, Marion, and then Leavenworth for 3 years. Naturally after being in Trenton State, Jersey for 6 years then Marion for 8 years which is an extremely harsh prison, to come to Leavenworth and be in general population can't help but be an improvement and in particular to my situation because all the other places were so extreme.

H: Incidentally, people we've met along the line in Trenton, other places we've been around the country, a lot of people have sent their fraternal, warm and hearty greetings. I'm trying to think of....

S: OK. I'd like as you go around to the other people give 'em my greetings.

H: We surely will. There are many people who know you or who have kept in touch, one way or another, starting with David Gilbert, he's up in -- he's been shifted by the way.

S: Where is he now?

H: I say this with surprise and concern because he's a good personal friend of ours.

S: Mine too.

H: And we've seen him quite a lot. We only got to know him after he got into the pen but we've seen him maybe 8 times over the last three years. Well, you know his route I suppose. He started in Auburn, sent up to Dannamora and then back to Attica and now he's in S -- we got letter, we haven't talked to him, he's been moved again and is in Comstock.

S: I think it's over in the eastern part of the state.

H: Boy, they seem to get on his case after he's been anywhere for a while.

Guard: Peltier is coming in a few minutes.

H: Well, thank you. They certainly keep you abreast. He's in Comstock, he tries to get active in each place. I think they don't like a guy to become an organizer.

S: They play musical chairs.

H: They've done that with you to a certain extent. How is your health? Is it holding up at all? I know you've had problems.

S: I was exposed to tuberculosis when I was in Trenton State prison.

H: I know.

S: That was a terrible thing.

H: Are your lungs OK -- apparently...?

S: Well, I try to keep `em [blown out], I jog and try to blow it out. Also when I first came to Leavenworth in '87 they assigned me to a cell with a person who 3 months later got sick and I found out that he was sent to Springfield [Federal Hospital] for AIDS. You know, in other words, it's not a -- they don't seem concerned for my health.

H: It's lousy but I don't think there was any particular danger to you from that specific....

S: But otherwise I exercise and try to stay in the best condition I can.

H: Are you in touch with Jill? Is there any support movement in the central part of the country?

S: People in general that I've known for a while in the movement.

H: My wife and I are really committed to try to enlarge and intensify awareness of political prisoners....

S: Yes, I'm in touch with Jill, Soffiyah -- she's working hard to build support for a sentence reduction.

H: I think from what little we've heard --

we've never met her except on the phone and I think she's mildly hopeful.

S: An attorney is always mildly hopeful.

H: She sounds like a person and not an attorney. She's more likely to be honest with us than with her client.

S: I hope she's right.

H: I hope she's right too.

S: If enough people get behind it I think there could be reason for hope. She has two other people working with her, Nkechi Taifa and Susan Hull -- also Bonnie Kerness [just came aboard] and together they do a pretty good job.

H: I'll repeat what I said in the beginning; if there's anything, any contact we can do on the outside; if there's any reading materials or anything like that we could try to arrange for you....

S: Nothing pops into my head right now but if I can get in touch with you....

H: By all means. You have our address. We'd like to help in any way we can.

S: I appreciate it.

H: You have our deep admiration and I guess gratitude....

S: So do you have mine.

H: I guess not all of us have the fortitude to do what you've done. We sure have to work like hell to get you back on the street. That's a cinch. Please keep in touch with us. If anything occurs to you, you know, you don't have to think of the top of your head. We'll let you know anything that results from our trip.

S: OK.

End of Tape

On February 20, 1991 the following article appeared in the Guardian.

PRISONERS LOOK TO A FREE AND INDEPENDENT HOMELAND

By Betty and Herman Liveright

"To me, the idea that African-Americans can achieve self-determination in this country, while maintaining a legal association with the white society that has oppressed us, is long past," Sundiata Acoli told us during a recent visit at the U.S. Penitentiary at Leavenworth, Kan., where he is serving a sentence of life plus 30 years.

Acoli is one of dozens of incarcerated men and women of various national backgrounds who have put their lives and liberty on the line for the goal of "self-determination for African-Americans." Sekou Odinga is another.

Born into a Black working-class family in rural Texas, Acoli graduated from Prairie View A. and M. College at 19 as a promising math student and went to New York for a career as a computer analyst. "But in a way," he told us, "I never got those early years in the South out of my head."

In the 1960s, Acoli's commitment to civil rights led to his enlistment in the Black Panther Party. He lived under constant surveillance and harassment and in 1969 was arrested in what was known as the New York 21 conspiracy. After two years in prison awaiting trial, he was acquitted.

In 1973 he was in a New Jersey Turnpike confrontation which ended with fellow Black nationalist Assata Shakur wounded and captured, Zayd Shakur killed and a state trooper shot dead. Acoli was convicted of the trooper's murder.

Acoli is a man of remarkable self-contain-

conversed with him by telephone through a heavy glass panel that separates prisoners from visitors.

Scowling, Odinga peered at us for a long moment and then he smiled warmly and put his palms flat against his side of the partition as a sign of greeting.

"Black self-determination?" Odinga said, when we asked for his interpretation of the concept. "It's a huge question. All I can give you is my vision. It means different things to different people.... When I talk about it, I'm talking about independence for african people in this country. That means land and independence for the Republic of New Africa, the area considered the Black Belt - a separate, solvent government on that territory.

"Now my brother, when he talks about it," he continued, "is talking about being economically independent in this racist society we call the United States. What's important to me right now is that the idea be given to our people - to be debated as a possibility - maybe a desirability." "We've worked this land," he declared, "died for it and on it. Slaves built the South with their unpaid labor. And this land was actually promised to us. Promised to us," he repeated, laughing sardonically.

"Forty acres and a couple of mules promised us way back then. What we say now is, if you took the 35 or 40 million New Africans in this country today and gave them each 40 acres, we'd have the land covered."

"Do I think they're ever going to give it to us? Not because they want to, that's sure. Can they be forced to give it to us? I think so, knowing the nature of capitalist in the U.S. If they see

ment. As he responded to our question on what the concept of self-determination for African-Americans means to him, his proud restraint was almost forbidding.

"In dealing with an oppressor," he said, in a low voice, "the only way you're free is if you're free completely. Then, only then, can you decide whether or not you want to have any connection with them." So I advocate self-determination. I advocate a Black nation in this country - in other words, a free and independent, separate land!" Asked if his goal is realistic, Acoli smiled faintly. "A lot of folks take offense when those who have been dominated for so long even think about separating from them. If you look at it from the perspective of men and women who have been subjugated for 500 years, well, it's not so difficult."

Sekou Odinga is a political prisoner in the U.S. Penitentiary at Marion, Ill., the most heavily secured institution in the federal system. He is serving a sentence of 40 years plus \$50,000 fine. A devout Moslem, Odinga looks to the future in terms of the program of the Republic of New Africa which, he believes, has the divine approval of Allah. His incarceration, he declares, results from his taking a stand against a government that seeks to destroy the independence movement of Black people.

Decide!" Odinga is tall and strikingly erect, with shoulder-length locks and a fierce black beard; his bearing seemed to be in ironic response to the ignominy of having to meet us in handcuffs. We

"It's Up To Our People To

something is more beneficial to them than not, they usually go for it."

Odinga continued the lecture. "You know what I mean? Like Malcolm used to talk about throwing a monkey wrench into 'their' machinery so it ain't business usual: The stock market doesn't run as usual, the trains don't run as usual, planes can't land as usual -- the economic system isn't running as usual and it's all because of those New Africa people. The capitalists are going to say, 'Hold it! What do those niggers want?'"

The vision made Odinga eyes shine. Then he sighed and relaxed. He conceded that because of time limitations he had vastly oversimplified his view of the long, hard, complicated struggle. He added that the exact line of that struggle was not yet clear.

"Most of the brothers and sisters I know who consider themselves citizens of the Republic of New Africa are socialist in some form or other. But at this point there isn't any absolute agreement on the system of government the Republic will adopt. It's up to our people to decide."

Before we left, Odinga smiled and told us he was sure the Republic would be a multireligious society in which people of all races would be welcome as citizens, as long as they were ready to uphold the new society's principles. Chuckling gently he suggested, "If you should decide to join us -- well, maybe I can arrange it for you."

End

Second Interview

As co-editors of "Their Chance To Speak", RD1 Box 124, Stephentown, NY 12168 Betty and Herman Liveright periodically published the prisoners interviews in the Guardian newspaper. Sundiata's interview was published in the Feb. 20, 1991 issue. Betty sent Sundiata a copy of the published interview and notified him that she and Herman would return to Leavenworth to take photos of the previously interviewed political prisoners. Sundiata asked if they could interview Russel Haroun Shoats on their return trip, and stated that he also wanted to discuss their published summarization of his earlier interview. They agreed to do so.

On March 19, 1991 Betty and Herman returned to Leavenworth. This time Betty accompanied Herman inside Leavenworth Penitentiary and Sundiata was able to meet her for the first time -- a memorable occasion -- where they conducted the following discussion and interview.

B: It's March 19, Wednesday morning, we're in Leavenworth U.S. Penitentiary and we're about to visit with our friend Sundiata Acoli.

S: What I want to do is kinda get an understanding with you -- in other words -- I think it's a good project, right?...

B: You have to say that anyway (laughs).

S: No, no, I do, and I think you're doing an excellent job and that it's a good project but I think that you should try -- other people probably have the same kind of complaints -- which is, you should try to quote a person directly whenever you can.

I know you can't always do that because I know it's hard to write spoken words. I understand that, you know, I definitely do. But what I noticed was that you took answers -- I understand you're trying to get an overall view -- so you took [and combined] answers from 3 or 4 different questions, right? -- and then you kinda recomposed the question to fit the answers.

In other words, it makes it a little bit vague, it makes it a little bit harder to follow -- it makes it not answer the question but gets the general idea across. That's alright, that's good. I just think that if you try to ask a question and [from] somewhere in that answer [try to quote the person directly] -- I don't know how you're going to get all that in because you've only got a [limited amount of space to write up the answer] -- I know that, I understand that.

H: (Remonstrates about having to cut, etc.)

S: Everybody does it, even people [who] tend to answer questions [frequently] and I'm not used to answering questions.

H: That's not up to you or anybody because you should have the right to answer any way you want to.

B: Is there any specific thing that was unclear? That maybe misrepresented you.

S: OK, OK, when you first came you asked me what caused me to become political, right? Now what I said was that [it was] just being Black in America. A lot of people don't like that answer, so I explained [what I meant], but...

B: Except not all those people become political.

S: OK, OK, right. But see I'm talking about as far as [I'm concerned], me, right? I just think [it was] the general conditions of Black oppression in this country. Black people, like any other people, have various reasons but as you say not all of them become political.

But when the interview came out it kind of implied that the reason I became political -- I think it said something like "I never go those early days of the South out of me", right? Now what that says is that the conditions in the South are so much harsher than conditions in the North and West -- and it kind of puts the blame on the South.

H: Oh, that's wrong.

S: What I was saying was that it's the

conditions in America. What [your answer] does is let America off the hook and puts the weight on the South -- and that's what people do all the time, they put the weight on the South.

H: That's absolutely wrong.

B: I want to interject. They left out a phrase which we very carefully put in and that might not have helped. It really said in our article that it was the poor conditions and so on that you had as a child, it wasn't that -- you happened to live in the South -- but it was not because it was the South, it was because you had seen the poverty, that's what it said and they left that out, because I remember we -- you're right, it didn't make sense.

S: [The place] where they beat that guy (video taped L.A. police beating of Rodney King), that wasn't in the South -- I'm talking about the one on national TV. What it says -- when people want to dump all the weight on the South is -- well, people in the North and West don't have any reason to be political, or anything to struggle for.

B: We almost should have a talk to the Guardian and they should put in a correction or something....

S: No, No. I just kind of have to slow down [to explain myself better.] Hope you don't mind....

(Betty and Herman remonstrate).

S: You have to understand that I understand your problem, and also I'm not the best talker in

the world either you know -- like I notice that I keep saying a lot or ``you knows'', and it's different when talking than when reading what's said, right? When you write....

H: Maybe we should have cut more, We did cut....

S: Don't even worry about that.

B: That was in his transcript.

S: Yeah, in the transcript.

H: But you can edit, as long as long as you don't misrepresent what a person says.

S: Yes, yes. And I understand that when you write it, [you transcribe it], you edit it, and then you take it to them and they start editing what you wrote, right? So then, what you've got in the end is something that's three times edited or removed from the original or whatever you call it.

B: Well, we're going to have a book, you know, and some of it....

H: There you said, ``you know''.

(All laugh)

S: I said ``you know'' a lot and said ``right'' a lot.

B: Everybody does. They say, ``OK'', ``see'', a lot, you know. All the persons we talk to.

S: Well, look, I think you kind of think that I'm critical [of you]. No, no, not really. I want you to really understand that. I was surprised that you got it printed so quickly because usually people collect information about -- I didn't know you were making a book. I didn't realize that until I got your letter, I don't think so. Maybe you said it before, but -- people [always come and] say they're writing a book. More things happen to get buried there than anywhere (laughs), cause they never get the book out. You know what I'm talking about. OK. How long do you think it will take to make this book?

H: The book? I would say it'll take us at least another 8 months to finish it and then maybe by that time we'll have someone interested in bringing it out. So it would be a year from where we're sitting before....

B: We haven't even transcribed all the pages.

S: Have you got people helping you because you've got a massive project on your hands?

B: No, not now. That's what I've been doing. We did have someone transcribing....

H: She'll help us again.

S: I know too that I don't speak very plainly, because -- you know how it is -- it's hard to speak precisely, my voice is not very clear, and when you listen to it on tape it's hard to [transcribe], some of the words run together or whatever.

H: Tell us a little about your present frame of mind, situation, legal situation, if there is anything new. Because we only have half an hour. And I don't want to lose you.

S: OK. My present legal situation is that Jill Elijah, [my attorney] is getting together -- it's kind of like a pamphlet [brochure], but it's also to explain that when I was in the unit in Trenton -- when you put people in a unit that's first opened there's a lot of chaos, a lot of....

B: You're talking about a unit in the prison?

S: Yes, [the Management Control Unit (MCU)] in Trenton [State Prison]. But what I'm trying to say is that they put a bunch of us in a unit [that was created] overnight. Prisoners were disconcerted, in other words they've [been put in a unit and] got no charge, right? So when you put people in a unit [without reason] like that you have a lot of rebellion.

Prisoners are mad, [angry] right? So they throw trash on the tier and things like that because, first, they're in the unit for no reason, second, they don't have showers, they don't have their legal material, personal property, and stuff like that. And so, they protest. So what I'm saying is that I was put in the unit when it first opened up and held there for the next five years at Trenton. And over that period of time they gave us a lot of bogus charges.

First, what they would do would be to attack us and then give us assault charges in order to add extra time[to our prison sentence]. They did this

so much that a federal judge stepped in and said, ``Wait a minute, this is ridiculous, you all are giving out bogus assault charges'', and he threw all the charges out.

Then, in order to get around that they began to give us institutional disciplinary charges -- bogus ones. And each time we'd go to the disciplinary committee they would take two months, three months, six months, and up to a year of ``good time''. So what they did lengthened everybody's sentence in that unit 2, 3, 4, or 5 years. Then I got transferred out of state [into the federal system] -- I was never able to get my good time back but people who weren't transferred eventually got theirs back. So what it boils down to is that my lawyer, Jill Soffiyah Elijah, is bringing a petition to get my good time restored in order to lower my [parole] eligibility date. And that's the latest thing [on my legal situation].

H: What court does that go before?

S: State court. I don't have it in court now but it'll be in court soon.

B: State here?

S: No, the State of New Jersey.

B: What about parole?

S: Well, you see that's the point. Right now I've got a '95 eligibility date because of all the extra good time they took through bogus charges -- and they really don't have my work time and all that figured correctly either. The petition gets all of that dealt with -- and hopefully my parole

eligibility can be brought down -- I've lost right now over two years of good time. If I can get my good time back I hope to bring it down to '92.

B: Now that means you get a hearing for parole. Is that what you're saying?

S: No, right now I've got to get a hearing for parole in '95.

It's really '96 but when they give me my work time credits it'll be down to '95.

B: And they're working on getting it to '92.

S: We're hoping to get it down somewhere reasonable, right.

B: Is anybody -- is there any precedent -- anybody that's been able to do this? Has she been able to get anybody else? Do you know any of the political people that she represents?

S: I know she's worked on Marilyn Buck's [of the Brink's RICO/Asata Shakur Escape] case, and perhaps Silvia Baraldini [of the Brink's RICO/Assata Shakur Escape] case, she's done work on filing cases for them.

Other prisoners in Trenton state prison have gotten their lost good time back, but since I was transferred to the feds I didn't have access to the [New Jersey] state courts to be able to try to get back my good time.

Do you want to take those pictures?

H: Go ahead....

S: Oh, OK, [you'll take them at] random, I

get it. Here's one thing I'd like you to consider. I need something to -- OK, I need something to get out to people -- something to present to people for propaganda [around my sentence-reduction]. In other words, my lawyer's going to have public events to try and build support around this thing so I need something to present some of my ideas [to people] -- How would you feel if I made a pamphlet out of my interview? Would that hurt your book or anything?

H: Oh, no.

B: No, use it -- It's yours too.

S: I'd appreciate it because I could make it into a pamphlet, I really like it, and I think you did an excellent interview job even though we had this discussion -- I want you to understand (Herman remonstrates) that we're talking among each other as friends, and that I really like the interview.

B: I wonder what Jill thinks about it....

S: I'm going to send her a copy. I think she's going to like it too. See, that's why I said I'd like to make a pamphlet out of it so that it definitely gets out -- too, court cases cost money, right? She's overloaded now, overworked to death, trying to raise finances, contributing her time, and all that. Now that takes money, so I need something to

B: She's very conscientious.

S: She is, she's absolutely beautiful, very

few other people....

H: Does she get out here at all?

S: When she can but you know it's always a money factor -- coming way out here.

B: Does anybody come down from Chicago, which is a little closer?

S: Well, Chicago is really tight. You see, they have Marion [Penitentiary to deal with], and their hands are full dealing with that -- but even so, when it's an emergency I'll tell them it's an emergency and they're always available to come down. But it's a strain on them, it would be a strain on anybody....

B: You're talking about The Peoples Law Office and Jan Susler?

S: And Michael Deutsch and Jeffrey Haas....

B: Well, that's good -- I guess. It's not enough -- What did you think about the Tribunal? What have you heard about it?

H: Wait a minute, let's finish this other subject. If we can help in any way....

S: You're helping beautifully by what you're doing.

H: I know and that's what we have to concentrate on but if, you know we're out there, and if there's any incidental thing that will help, you have our address.

S: Right. Right. You're good about accepting [collect telephone] calls. That's good, because I was afraid that you might not accept Haroun's, Russell Shoats'[of the Black Panther Party] call -- his African name is Haroun -- I think he might have used Russell Shoats when he called you.

B: Oh, he did, he did. We're going to see him.

S: I didn't know whether you'd accept it or not so I said ``Look, if they don't accept, use my name''. I didn't know if you'd accept it from me either (Laughs by Betty) -- but at least you'd have an idea of where it was coming from.

H: Look, now this is how we're using our lives right now.

S: Yeah, and the reason I wanted you to add him [to the interview list] is because he's also had a long history of struggle. But, you know, nobody in the struggle has really had that much of an opportunity to at least say what they're struggling about. Now, he's very good at -- he's a good talker, and he's very good at presenting his ideas.

B: Now, he's from New York, right?

S: No. He's from Philadelphia. But he's been down longer than I have. He's been down 19 years or something like that.

B: That takes us back to....

S: '71, I've been down since '73, and it takes us back to '69 or '70, or something like that.

B: We were in Philadelphia for a few years. We left there in '69 and knew something about the liberation movement, the nationalist movement, I should say. Do you remember -- have you heard of the playwright Charlie Fuller who wrote ``Soldier's Story?'' He is a friend of ours.

S: Oh, yeah, he wrote a few more books too that I read.

B: Well, plays, he writes plays.

S: OK, I'm thinking about....

B: And he had a movie.

S: I've never seen it.

B: They don't show it here.

S: Well, you have to understand they only have a few TV's on the range so what it [boils down to] is what the majority of the poisoners want to look at, and that's what you've got to look at.

B: They don't show film, Hollywood film?

S: They do. But a play is kind of hard [to get prisoners to watch].

S: No, there's a movie, ``Soldier's Story.'' Denzel Washington was in it, have you heard of Denzel Washington?

H: If it ever comes around on TV....

B: Charlie was one of the people who very early was, you know, concerned about the whole uplift that the nationalist movement needs morally. I mean he was separating that movement from the White morality. He had a great many ideas about that.

S: Unless -- there was an author that I thought was named Charles Fuller too. Author of books, no?

B: I don't know.

H: Yeah, I think he's written a book or two -- He's primarily a playwright.

B: He was in Philadelphia. That's where we met him.

S: This person wrote long ago in the '40's. This Charles Fuller that I know, most of his books came out in the '40's.

H: No, this guy's much younger.

S: He's younger, OK, then I don't think it could be him.

B: I think he's about your age.

S: I'll take that as a compliment.

B: Yeah, that was in -- I was in the theater in Philadelphia. That was '65.

S: You were in the theater in Philadelphia?

B: Yes, I worked in the Theater of the Living Arts. Then I got to know Charlie, you see, because of theater. There was a theater group up in North Philadelphia, a Black theater. Rosemary Mealy was -- there are two Rosemary Mealys I hear, so I don't know

S: I know one, a kind of a playwright and I know she's definitely an activist.

B: She's Sam Anderson's wife. Do you know Sam Anderson?

S: No, not offhand.

B: Anyway, she was there, she was one of the people doing theater....

S: OK. I think -- I remember some Rosemary Mealy, the one that I know went to Cuba....

B: I think she's the one.

S: She went during the Tribunal period. And they had a Malcolm X commemoration or something over there.

B: Wasn't it recently, like last year?

S: Right.

B: And then somebody sprang somebody else and said there was another Rosemary Mealy and I don't know who that is. Anyway, that was Philadelphia. You weren't in Philadelphia....?

S: No, New York.

B: But you were part of this Panther....

S: Most of us came out of the Panther Party. Some way or the other, most of us were connected with the Panther Party.

B: We were interested. We were in Corpus Christi, as we told you. We met with a group of students in criminal justice at the University there and one of the -- they're very eager young people -- they have a very interesting teacher. She's a friend of ours and she makes sure they see all the good stuff, like Assata Shakur's book and all these things, George Jackson -- and there's one young man there who's trying to do a history of the Black Panthers and so we were trying to show him where to write. He wants to know -- It would be great -- I don't know how much has been written, not enough I don't think.

S: No, not really, in other word, not -- probably bits and pieces around everywhere but I don't think anything's ever been pulled together for a history or....

B: I was thinking about -- is Shoats a writer?

S: Yeah, I don't know -- he could if he wanted. I don't know that he writes that often but he could if he wanted to. There's always the outlet problem, right? Getting it printed somewhere.

H: There are a few people around like Terry

Bisson, a fellow you know. You were in the book.

S: Some of my paintings were, mostly.

H: It was great.

B: A great book.

S: He did a very good job on that.

B: That was Ray [Lavasseur of the Ohio 7], Ray did that too.

S: And Tim Blunk [of the Resistance Conspiracy], I think.

B: Yeah, Tim Blunk. We didn't get to see Tim. We were in Marion in January, we stopped by and Tim, they said was going to be there but he hadn't arrived but now I think he's back there.

He had been sent from Washington, DC, after the agreement. Remember the agreement that the Washington Resistance group made with the government, saying if they pleaded guilty, there'd be some arrangement made with Alan Berkman [of the Resistance Conspiracy].

S: Yes.

B: But they didn't so they were all sentenced and Tim sent back to Marion.

S: And they gave them outrageous sentences too.

B and H: That's right.

B: Did you by any chance know about the ``60 Minutes'' movie that was on last Sunday?

S: I heard something about ``60 Minutes'' doing a film about Springfield [Federal Hospital, MO].

B: Yes, and Alan Berkman spoke.

S: I didn't get to see it but I heard about it. Alan Berkman spoke?

B: Yes, and they had him on camera and he was telling about how he had to get medical attention from outside sources because he couldn't trust the doctors....

S: I can understand that, he definitely....

H: I don't know whether he got to Rochester. Did you hear anything....?

S: I don't know either. I know one thing, I know Springfield is horrible.

B: They really took that place to pieces on that program.

S: Yeah, I heard they did a pretty good expose'. And Springfield is like that, they've got some men here who can attest to that. It's playing Russian Roulette going to Springfield, that's one way they try to scare people. [Get out of line and] they'll say, ``Yeah, we'll send you to Springfield, '' you know what I mean? And the response is ``Springfield?! Jeeze!! (Laughs)

B: We were going to visit Warren Ballentine, Abdul Aziz [of the Virgin Island - 5]. You know him?

S: Yeah, I think he's here....

H: Not now, though, they sent him to Springfield. Within the last couple of weeks.

S: They did?!

H: We don't know why and they don't tell you what's wrong.

S: Hmmm. That's a very....

B: Do you have any idea what his problem was?

S: No, and I could look into that. That definitely should be looked into.

B: We're going to try to visit him. In Springfield. If we can.

S: I know he'd appreciate it....

H: (To guard) A couple of minutes, please.

B: I didn't know whether you'd heard anything about it. I was so shocked because this guy needs help.

S: If he left here [I should have heard about it]. He was in SHU [Special Housing Unit i.e. lock-up]. [For him] to go to Springfield I think

somebody would have said something if anybody knew anything about it. I haven't heard anything. This is the first time I've heard it. (Sundiata rises to leave.....).

H: Look, before we have to quit....

S: (Laughs). I'm trying to keep you on schedule....

H: What are some specific things we can do for you?

S: To do what you're doing.

B: Is there any books or anything you need?

S: Not right now. Just keep doing what you're doing. Keep publishing and if you can get by Springfield -- definitely go see Aziz if you can.

B: I have to call.

H: They probably won't let us in.

B: I talked to the Virgin Islands, I talked to some people there because he has had no support, nothing from the Virgin Islands, so I'm hoping that he'll hear from them.

S: I do too. He definitely needs help.

B: That he needs, definitely. He's under so much strain.

H: Are you doing any teaching now?

S: Not that much. I told you about the presentation I gave to the African Cultural Society but mostly I try to teach by example (laughs).

H: What about the presentation you gave?

S: [It was] on political prisoners. And I gave a presentation on political prisoners as it deals with African people, Black people, in the U.S. Other people gave presentations on political prisoners as it deals with Whites and Native Americans and Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Chicanos.

B: Do you have anything in writing?

S: No, [just] notes and things.

B: I'd like to see it.

S: Sure.

End of Tape

SUNDIATA ACOLI

Sundiata Acoli , a New Afrikan political prisoner of war, mathematician, and computer analyst, was born January 14, 1937, in Decatur, Texas, and raised in Vernon, Texas. He graduated from Prairie View A&M College of Texas in 1956 with a B.S. in mathematics and for the next 13 years worked for various computer-oriented firms, mostly in the New York area.

During the summer of 1964 he did voter registration work in Mississippi. In 1968 he joined the Harlem, New York, Black Panther Party and did community work around issues of schools, housing, jobs, child care, drugs, and police brutality.

In 1969 he and 13 others were arrested in the Panther 21 conspiracy case. He was held in jail without bail and on trial for two years before being acquitted , along with all other defendants, by a jury deliberating less than two hours. Upon release, FBI intimidation of potential employers shut off all employment possibilities in the computer profession and stepped up COINTELPRO harassment, surveillance, and provocations soon drove him underground.

In May 1973, while driving the New Jersey Turnpike, he and his comrades were ambushed by N.J. state troopers. One companion, Zayd Shakur, was killed, another companion Assata Shakur, was wounded and captured. One state trooper was killed and another wounded, and Sundiata was captured days later.

After a highly sensationalized and prejudicial trial he was convicted of the death of the state trooper and was sentenced to Trenton State Prison (TSP) for life plus 30 years consecutive.

Upon entering TSP he was subsequently con-

finied to a new and specially created Management Control Unit (MCU) solely because of his political background. He remained in MCU almost five years in a striped cell smaller than the SPCA's space requirement for a German Shepherd dog. He was only let out of the cell for ten minutes a day for showers and two hours twice a week for recreation and was subjected to constant harassment and several attacks by guards. During one period he was not let out of the cell for six continuous months.

In September 1979, International Jurist interviewed Sundiata and subsequently declared him a political prisoner. A few day later prison officials secretly transferred him during the middle of the night to the federal prison system and put him enroute to the infamous federal concentration camp at Marion, Illinois, although he had no federal charges or sentence. An entrance physical exam by federal medical personnel disclosed that he had been heavily exposed to tuberculosis while at Trenton State Prison.

Marion is the highest security prison in the U.S. also one of the harshest, and there Sundiata was locked down 23 hours a day in a stripped cell containing only a stone bed, toilet, wash bowl, and a few personal items. Brutal conditions and violence are epidemic at Marion where murders and assaults by guards and prisoners alike are common occurrences. During one turbulent period beginning October, 1983, Sundiata and all prisoners were confined to their cell blocks 24 hours a day for nine continuous months as wolf packs of guards roamed about the complex beating prisoners at random.

Sundiata spent eight years at Marion, longer than most any other prisoner. In July, 1987 he was transferred to the federal penitentiary at

Leavenworth, Kansas, where he is currently confined.

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