

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
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Conversations with
with
Mr. Similo Grootboom
By the Black Liberations Movements Mosaic Group
King William's Town, South Africa
August 4, 2008

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On August 4, 2008

Location: The Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance, King William's Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa, and the Steve Biko Statue in King William's Town, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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Similo Grootboom: My name is Similo Grootboom. I live here in King William's Town. I am the coordinator of the Dickinson University [College] party who are here in South Africa for the next three weeks. Today is Monday, the 4 of August, 2008. We are at the Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance. In fact, I am standing right next to his grave. I want to talk a bit about his life, and of course this Garden of Remembrance. Well, the story of Steve Biko has been told all over the world, over thirty years now. This is his birthplace, King William's Town. Steve was born here, just across that hill in Ginsberg and we will be going to his home very shortly. This is the town that was in the news at the time, when he was banished, put under house arrest for many days, many hours. Ntsiki Biko, his wife, would tell us that when Steve Biko died, there was a little bit of discussion where he would be buried. And Steve had always regarded himself as one of the community of King Williams Town. So, here he lies in this cemetery, amongst his own people; there was no special place designed for Steve Biko. The family decided consciously that Steve must be buried amongst his own people. His humble grave and the headstone here, as can be read. Now, when Steve Biko died in 1977, I was in high school then, I was also a student at the time. I was not living in King William's Town, but I did attend the funeral—a moving

funeral—at the time. And his first-born son, Nkosinathi [Biko] was a toddler at the time. Ntsiki, his wife, was a nurse, and I'm sure she will tell you more about the day when you met her and interview her in the next few days. But let me come now to the Garden of Remembrance. With the advent of the new democracy in 1994, there was a lot of debate about the national holidays in this country, “What do we do with the 21 of March—which symbolizes the Sharpeville Massacre—21 March. What do we do with the 12 of September that marks the death of Steve Biko, and many others? How do we commemorate those days in the memory of the nation?”

Now, the national government and the leaders in this country, they sat down and they decided to package all these important days in the calendar of the South African nation. They decided that-- 21 March actually—must be a day which is called Human Rights Day. That’s a day in which we remember all those people whose rights have been abused by the colonial and apartheid governments. Steve Biko’s death falls on that day as well. We did not as a nation put specifically a date for every hero’s death day. We didn’t do that; we packaged. So, Steve Biko’s day is not commemorated as a national holiday for that reason. Now, but, the government equally said, “We need to remember our heroes in various ways.” In 1997, the government—when I say government I mean the local government and the provincial government—put up this Garden of Remembrance to commemorate the memory of Steve Biko, so that this can be immortalized in the annals of the history of this country. I remember that day vividly: the former president, the one and only Nelson Mandela, was still the president of the country at the time. He was here when this was opened and dedicated to the memory of Steve Biko. Again—I must not forget this—last year—2007—marked the 30th anniversary of the death of Steve Biko, and the provincial government now—my department—put aside 2 million rand to commemorate. We call that project “Steve Biko, 30/30.” What it means, Steve Biko was 30 years when he was

killed, and last year was 30 years anniversary of that death. So it was aptly called, "Steve Biko 30/30." So that's the memory of Steve Biko. And of course after here, we will be visiting even Leopold Street where Steve Biko had his own offices, to which at one stage he was banished. The security forces use to visit Steve Biko at those premises. We are going to see that. And we are also going to go and see the [Zanempilo] health center that was founded by Steve Biko and his colleague at the time, Dr. Mamphela Ramphele. We are going to see that thing, and make arrangements to speak to a few of those people who were present at the time, so that we can get the feel, how was the situation at the time. So guys, welcome to the Steve Biko Garden of Remembrance. Thank you very much!

Amy Woldarski: I have a question.

Similo Grootboom: You have a question.

Amy Woldarski: Yeah, is the head stone newer, or was it erected in '77 when he died?

Similo Grootboom: Yes, this head stone is not new. It was actually constructed a few years after his death. That's what happened. Thanks, and cut... Oh, there's another question.

Kim Rogers: Does the government, or any historians have any idea how many people were killed, were disappeared during the apartheid era?

Similo Grootboom: That is a tricky question, I don't think... because some of the records were destroyed, you see. So, there could be no accuracy to the letter of the total number of people who were killed during the apartheid era. You see, maybe I should mention this. In the last few years, I undertook a study: I am talking about the importance of exhumation and reburial, what it means to African societies. I just had graduated from [the University of] Fort Hare this year with a master's degree in that research. One of the chapters in my research, I will have you let you read this, is the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] process, Truth and Reconciliation process. And the kind of stories that came in there. You know, it's very difficult to put a number, and say so many people disappeared because some of the people disappeared and the security forces have never actually even come forward during the TRC process to say, "We know about so and so, and so and so, that could not be traced," so it's very difficult to put the number, but it's thousands. It's thousands of people. Thank You. Any other questions? Fine.

*The remainder of this tape was filmed around the Steve Biko statue in King William's Town; unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to hear.

Similo Grootboom: [At the King William's Town Statue of Steve Biko] His mother has died, and his wife is staying at another house.... So this is kind of.... But to get inside the route of the....

Jeremy Ball: And it's the same artist who did the statue in....

Similo Grootboom: It is the same as you can see, the one in East London. ... In 1997.... And the entire family, of eight people stayed here, all of them....

[End of Tape]