

Karl Gunnar (KG) Norén

ISAK

At the age of 20 his first mission was as a member of a delegation of four high school students calling upon the Swedish party leaders in the parliament, 1963, due to the ongoing food boycott. They met with the prime minister and the other leaders and his road was decided. After years involved in the Folk High School Students Organisation and having worked as a teacher, he took on the job as a campaign officer of ISAK in 1984. Apart from the organising of campaigns Norén wrote several articles.



Karl Gunnar Norén

Bertil Högberg: I am sitting here in Solidarity House, it is 6 September 2005, with K-G Norén. How did you become involved in solidarity work with Southern Africa and when did you start?

K-G Norén: For me it started very very early, because I was a student at a Folk High School in Stockholm when I was around 20 and my first mission was as a member of a delegation of four high school students and we called upon the Swedish party leaders in the parliament, 1963, and that was because of the ongoing food boycott. It was one of the first co-operative activities we had at the Folk High School Students Organisation. I don't remember very much because it was the same day a great spy affair was discussed in the parliament so the attention of the Prime Minister was rather split, but I remember very well when the Communist leader took us aside and presented very very good information about the whole situation in South Africa.

Bertil Högberg: But you met all the party leaders?

K-G Norén: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: And what was your message?

MR M: The message was to inform the party leaders about our campaign in the Folk High School Students Organisation, and to inform ourselves about what steps they were taking, to support the liberation movement. You see this was in the period when there was a very strong black liberation movement in the US and of course we discussed these interlinked questions in our schools. I was 20 years old.

Bertil Högberg: What was your role in that organization?

K-G Norén: I was just a member of the delegation, and we were about six or seven persons from several Folk High Schools.

Bertil Högberg: But you were actively involved in the boycott campaign in those days, from the student movement?

K-G Norén: Yes, but I was not a senior member, I can't remember that I did so much, but I was engaged, I still have the button and we did something but not very much. In fact it was my comrade Björn Hallberg that was more mature, that brought me into that campaign.

Bertil Högberg: And how did your involvement then develop?

K-G Norén: When I moved around in Sweden I had fights with the local shopkeepers about Koo marmalade, and told them that we still have a boycott and you can't sell this stuff, because this is against the black majority in South Africa, that was about what I did.

Bertil Högberg: And when did you become involved again, later?

K-G Norén: I moved to Stockholm from the very north of Sweden in 1984, and I saw an ad that they sought a temporary campaign officer for a campaign and I looked at it. I was a Folk High School teacher at that time, but with the support of my new fiancée I applied for that job. It was, the pay was about half of the Folk High School teacher's at that time.

Bertil Högberg: That was also a half time position wasn't it?

K-G Norén: 50% yes, and 50% of the pay.

Bertil Högberg: And you hadn't really been dealing with the liberation struggle in Southern Africa during the 70's and beginning of 80's?

K-G Norén: No, no, not more than that I was a member of the left wing party and we had steady support for both Africa and more for Vietnam and certainly I participated in that, party

work but not especially for South Africa.

Bertil Högberg: Okay. And you worked from 1984 up till?

K-G Norén: 1992, and from the beginning I was part-time, half-time and then I was full-time most of the time at the and when I finished it I was again half-time Folk High School teacher and half time solidarity worker, so it changed over time.

Bertil Högberg: Okay, but when you started you were the only one employed?

K-G Norén: No, there was Lars Hult.

Bertil Högberg: Okay, he was already there?

K-G Norén: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: So you were the second person then, okay.

K-G Norén: Yes, and I was not employed as a leader it was always Peter Göransson or Lars Hult that was the boss. I was campaign officer and he was information officer, that was the title.

Bertil Högberg: How would you describe ISAK as an organization when you started? What did you meet?

K-G Norén: First of all there were rather few persons that really worked with the organization. There were rather a lot of organizations, but the activists that we were in contact with were rather few I think, and the core consisted of very few persons. It was slimmed in that respect. And I think the persons were very dedicated, Lars Hult was particularly very very dedicated, I learnt much from him, he was younger than me but I was a family man, I had a family and he was single, he worked almost around the clock, very very dedicated and also the members of the board, in my experience each one was very very dedicated, you could call them and get support for campaigns at home, at work. Our office was in the same house as the Africa Groups and there were also very very dedicated persons there. It was really nice to work with that sort of person, it was a great bonus.

Bertil Högberg: ISAK at that time was housed in the same room basically as the Africa Groups.

K-G Norén: Yes, two desks and only two telephone lines and old typewriters, two of them, and the work involved a lot of telephone conversations with people, you were always on the

phone. You also had to do all the logistics, all the sending of buttons and information materials and you clean toilets in the morning and you distributed papers in the afternoon and in the evening you might go to a reception to an embassy or the Foreign Office. All the same, you were doing all that type of work and you slept very well after a day in ISAK.

Bertil Högberg: And what was the organization like when you left in 1992? What was the difference?

K-G Norén: The difference was that in the end you had journalists working that did not have much experience and I think generally some of the employees was merely there for a job, for a good job and for, certainly to make a contribution, but not that dedicated kind of person that I experienced in the early 80's. There was a difference.

Bertil Högberg: Okay, and if you look outside, the role of the organization, how was the situation for the organization at the beginning of the 80's and early in the 90's?

K-G Norén: Almost no one know what the organization was in 1984. 1986, 87 it was one of the most important organizations in Sweden, with very very strong influence in parliament, with several ministers, at big companies and also in the NGOs, the status in the NGO sector was very high, but certainly with journalists also, we had journalists that called us, we have free access to the important papers, I wrote personally about five or six or seven, debate articles in Dagens Nyheter the biggest paper in Sweden. I don't think any organization could place as much articles in the papers as we could.

Bertil Högberg: And you say that there was a change around 85, 86. The time of the state of emergency in SA. What would you say was creating this change?

K-G Norén: I think it was certainly a kick for the organization that we could place ourselves in media, I think that was the point. I also think the change came with the first legislation against trade with South Africa.

Bertil Högberg: Was it the change in legislation that affected the media or was the legislation a result of a change in the media climate and relations.

K-G Norén: No, no the change in legislation was as a result of all the work in the 80's and late 70's and when the change came it was as a result of our work, the organization's work, ours and others, and when you noticed that change the media got an understanding, and then we had free access to the media. It later changed again. If you look at the volume of press cuttings I think the peak was 86, 87 about. You could, you can't have an issue in the limelight forever, it's not possible.

Bertil Högberg: If you look back at your time here at ISAK what were the highlights, the special things that are strong in your memory?

K-G Norén: I participated in a very very interesting conference in Zimbabwe in 1986, "Children against Apartheid", and that was one of the peaks for me because I'm a teacher, I teach psychology, pedagogics and I train youth leaders, professionally since 30 years back. When I was in Zimbabwe, it was possible for me to do something for the children in South Africa it was a very high peak. And after that conference we, ISAK, also arranged our conference Children against Apartheid in Sweden, and I worked very closely with the late Prime Minister Olof Palme's wife, Lisbeth, and that was very interesting.

Bertil Högberg: Any other memories from your time?

K-G Norén: Yes, we worked both for Namibia and South Africa and as a personal interest I also began to work with Namibia, beside my work for South Africa and I wrote, I wrote two books on the question and I also made several radio programmes about both anti-apartheid work in South Africa and also for Namibia. I had been involved in the liberation on Namibia and that's very peculiar because I had an old military interest and when I realized that the Battle of Cuito Canavale in 1988 would result in the liberation of Namibia I made two radio programmes for Swedish Radio about that and I also wrote a book which was published on the same day that Namibia was liberated. And before that I also made some radio programmes from Mozambique and so on, I have that type of training also. I have a small studio in my home.

Bertil Högberg: ISAK being an umbrella organization for a number of NGOs, which were the most important organizations when it comes to the solidarity work here? The Covenant Church Youth (SMU)?

K-G Norén: Yes, and I'm not a Christian myself but I have very very much respect for the Christian people in this organization. They had a main role in the whole of the liberation work here in Sweden, and then second is certainly Africa Groups. Africa Groups were the most important because we were close together with Africa Groups, ISAK was started by the Africa Groups. Outside the African Groups I think it was also the left party, and also the Social Democratic Party, I think the left in parliament and also the Green Party made a contribution, I think all the parties with the exception of the right wing were rather active.

Bertil Högberg: That was the youth movements?

K-G Norén: Yes, the youth movements, but also the MPs, Members of Parliament, I wrote several motions, they took them as they were with the spelling errors and all. They took them as they were that was rather funny. We could meet them at parliament and they needed us

because the question was so highlighted in Sweden, so we were important for them, we were important for the media, for the television, for the radio, for the big papers and also other papers. For example the labour union papers.

Bertil Högberg: You said that the relations with Africa Groups were rather special because Africa Groups initiated this and it was growing from within the Africa Groups' office in the beginning, did you see any change in the relationship between the Africa Groups and ISAK over those years?

K-G Norén: No I can't see any change. It was about the same.

Bertil Högberg: ISAK's office and activities grew because you were one and a half staff members when you started and then when you left how many were employed, in the ISAK office?

K-G Norén: I think five or six, maybe seven.

Bertil Högberg: So you had moved to a separate floor in the same Solidarity House.

K-G Norén: Yes, I remember that we were so superior so we took over a good part of the role of the Africa Groups. I think we started as a little brother and at our highest peak I think, the Africa Groups became only second.

Bertil Högberg: I think that was one of the problems but it was also because ISAK had as you said access to parliament and was the most important vehicle for us. I think that's possibly why the Africa Groups stepped back in a way, but it became an identity problem.

K-G Norén: Yes, but I don't think it developed into a competition, no, I think we had different roles at that time and I think we played them rather well.

Bertil Högberg: From the beginning this was called more a campaign, then it became more of an organization.

K-G Norén: Yes.

Bertil Högberg: How did you see that transition, I mean when did that take place, that it became established more as an organization?

K-G Norén: I think that was not because of me as a person, but it was just at that time that I was an employee, before that it was very very provincial, and I remember that the first employees were only employed for seven or eight months.

K-G Norén: I remember now one high point was also the People's Parliament against Apartheid in 1985, 86 maybe, yes. That was a very very interesting.

Bertil Högberg: Can you say what that was, that People's Parliament, describe it?

K-G Norén: I think the idea from the beginning came from the Africa Groups, and then ISAK got the resources to develop that and it was a very very big event in the Peoples House in Stockholm and among others Prime Minister Palme and Oliver Tambo were present Palme was shot one week after.

Bertil Högberg: Yes, the speech he made there was his last public appearance.

K-G Norén: Yes, and I was responsible for the security during that conference and I wonder what would have happened with me, if he had got shot during the Peoples Parliament. I would have been in the public eye for ever.

Bertil Högberg: How many people were there for that?

K-G Norén: I think it was 500.

Bertil Högberg: That was a big event.

K-G Norén: A very big event, one of our biggest.

Bertil Högberg: The members of ISAK were national organizations.

K-G Norén: Yes, that was very important.

Bertil Högberg: But how about the local level, there were also local committees created.

K-G Norén: Yes, campaign committees, I think the basic organization was the Africa Groups at those places.

Bertil Högberg: What do you mean, that in the local ISAK committees it was mostly the Africa Groups that had the initiative and was the strong organization?

K-G Norén: Yes, I think we had campaign weeks at maybe 30, 40, places in Sweden, and if it was that number I think it's about three or four, where it was not the Africa Groups, that was the lead organization. The contact persons for the Africa Groups were in rather many cases the same person that was also the contact person for local ISAK committees. I think it was

more or less the same organization from the beginning. I think the campaign week was from the beginning the main activity and later you had all year round activities in most places. That was also a rather important development.

Bertil Högberg: Apart from the co-operation that took place within ISAK between the different organizations that took part, there were also other organizations outside ISAK which were still involved with the solidarity work. Can you mention some of those and what type of role did you have in relation to them?

K-G Norén: Yes, the labour union at Volvo for example, you also have in Gothenburg you have the very left wing parties like parties that were rather strongly influenced by the Soviet Union.

Bertil Högberg: Yes, KPLM (r).

K-G Norén: Yes, yes.

Bertil Högberg: But they were never members of ISAK?

K-G Norén: Yes we had one member, [indistinct].

Bertil Högberg: Not on a national level?

K-G Norén: No, not on a national level no. You have also committees with librarians and teachers in several places.

Bertil Högberg: What about the trade unions on a national level?

K-G Norén: I think the support was mostly with money and somewhat, I don't think the members were really involved in that. Maybe the administration, administration persons were interested in it, because they had a personal interest and because they participated.

Bertil Högberg: Were some of the trade unions members of ISAK?

K-G Norén: Yes, the shop assistant union.

Bertil Högberg: And also public employees I think.

K-G Norén: The teachers' organization were members also.

Bertil Högberg: What about the churches in themselves, the youth movements were members

but the churches in themselves were not members?

K-G Norén: Not members but I always saw strong support from the Church of Sweden, at their main office in Uppsala we had some persons I was in contact with and we also in fact made a Shell campaign with the Church of Sweden that was rather criticized by some of the members but they supported it and it was rather interesting, because the whole Shell campaign was rather different from all the other campaigns because it was more rough in the methods.

Bertil Högberg: Rough from the ISAK side?

K-G Norén: No, no, not from the ISAK side. It was rough in that way that we called for a local boycott of Shell dealers and it was a rather sensitive case because in small places it was not easy for every person to understand the reason to boycott the local dealer because you filled your car there and maybe he was the only guy that sold petrol and there was not another, that you could use. In that it was a rough campaign. We also had rather many problems with violent youth groups that burned a Shell petrol station and others lumped us together and said that all our campaigns stimulated their efforts to burn Shell petrol stations. We saw it another way, we had a non-violent boycott and we were not in one instance involved in any cooperation with those forces.

Bertil Högberg: But it became a problem?

K-G Norén: It became a problem yes, and also the first thing I mentioned with the rough methods to boycott the local dealer was also a problem, and many many people, mostly older people, they did not like to see the Church of Sweden as an organization that organized boycotts. It was difficult for them.

Bertil Högberg: What type of co-operation did you have on the Nordic level?

K-G Norén: We had in fact rather a lot of co-operation with them. We also had some co-operation with the Norwegian solidarity workers, especially when it came to Namibia they were a rather strong movement. And also the Finns because they were close to Namibia. I think yes, I think we had rather active work.

Bertil Högberg: Joint campaigns or was it just sharing of experiences?

K-G Norén: Not joint campaigns but since my wife is Danish, I was in Denmark rather a lot, I remember I took ideas for layout and publishing from the Danes. I imported the idea to print tabloid sheets we had not done that before and it was very successful, it's a rather cheap way to publish, you can publish rather a lot, the paper is cheap and you can have big bit print-runs.

Bertil Högberg: The co-operation on other European levels?

K-G Norén: Yes, we co-operated with Holland and with Great Britain, we visited each other and we participated in conferences and those sorts of things, not Germany, not France.

Bertil Högberg: And if you look at the countries now that you were working with, it's Namibia and South Africa that you said you were involved with, what was your, which were your partners would you say in those countries, which organizations did you deal with? Did you deal with anyone else than the ANC and SWAPO liberation movements?

K-G Norén: Yes the labour movement. The mine workers and also churches, particularly the South African Council of Churches. I met Frank Chikane in 1985.

Bertil Högberg: Did the fact that you had contacts with people within the liberation movements and other organizations, did that play any role in your campaigns?

K-G Norén: Yes, for example I ran a campaign for Radio Freedom and in that respect was in contact with Don Gubeni and I also met him here in Sweden, and I also met him in South Africa when I was there in 1991, just before the liberation. Yes, but we had also support work for UDF and in that respect I met Frank Chikane, and certainly we met the people from South Africa, they were in the office and we participated in meetings in town, but I don't think we took them on the campaigns very much because it was dangerous for them. I remember I lent Frank Chikane my UDF button, he told me that if he kept the button on the way back to South Africa it would cost him one year. So it was before 1990, it was not possible to highlight persons from South Africa because it was dangerous for them.

Bertil Högberg: And were there South Africans living in Sweden that could be used in your campaign work?

K-G Norén: No, not very many. I have some personal friends, South Africans, living in Sweden I think most South Africans were refugees from the 60's, from several music groups and they were very very little engaged in our job. I don't think we had South Africans really involved in the liberation work no.

Bertil Högberg: But the ANC office.

K-G Norén: Yes, the office, yes. The employees of the ANC office yes, but not civilians, civilian South Africans in Sweden.

Bertil Högberg: Were there any people that you really established a personal relationship

with?

K-G Norén: No, not really, only David Kgabang in the ANC office, I meet him still because I know his wife and his children. But not, no other personal relationships, no. I can also mention that my youngest daughter is legally adopted from Mozambique and her mother was South African, a refugee from there.

Bertil Högberg: So she's South African by origin then?

K-G Norén: Yes. She is.

Bertil Högberg: Okay, and did these visits that you mentioned, the visits from South Africans, you couldn't really use them in the campaign work as such, but what did it mean for the organization that you had these types of contacts?

K-G Norén: They had the impact that we were stimulated by them. They were senior persons that came to the office and they listened to us and we listened to them and we had contacts and we were stimulated.

Bertil Högberg: What happened to these relations after 1990 in Namibia and when things changed in SA?

K-G Norén: I think you had no further reasons to retain contacts over here, they were not that personal friends. And the most of persons I was in contact with during this period became in fact very very senior persons in their home countries. I think they were on another level, they were ministers and above my level.

Bertil Högberg: I agree, I have the same feeling. To conclude this now what do you think that this ISAK work has meant for the liberation of Southern Africa?

K-G Norén: I think it was of very very great importance. I look at the Swedish "establishment" they both had support from us with the pressure from below and then we could support them but we could also, we could also force them. We had a double role. In Sweden the NGOs are very important, its very important for the parliamentary world, it's very important for the local authorities and this was a very very powerful organization of NGOs. I think it was the broadest cooperation on any solidarity issue ever, and we could both pressure the society and support the society in a very very special way. I think it would be very good to use the same model for help to solve the process in the Middle East for example, because it's a very very fine way to assist with non-violent pressure to solve big issues. We had several big issues around us. This was one, only one. We had an important role.

Bertil Högberg: Okay, is there anything I forgot to ask about that you think is important to say about your work with ISAK?

K-G Norén: Yes, I don't know if it is important, but I'm rather disappointed about the situation in Zimbabwe and our former partners' involvement or non-involvement in this issue. I am rather disappointed and 15 years ago I could not have imagined that we would have that type of development in Southern Africa. And it is very very dangerous, very dangerous.