

Yale UN--Oral History

Interview with Raymonde Martineau

Interviewed by: James Sutterlin

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James Sutterlin: Ms. Martineau, I want first of all to thank you for participating in this Yale Oral History project, and I'd like to talk with you today for this purpose about your experiences as a member of the UN staff in Namibia during the period of the transition to independence there. And I'd like if I could to begin by asking you where did you come from, what were your duties? You were part of the UN staff before you went to Namibia?

Raymonde Martineau: Yes.

JS: And what were your duties?

RM: I was in charge, as I am still now, of relations with non-governmental relations at the United Nations office in Geneva. I had been in the UN for 13 years when I went to Namibia.

JS: And how were you selected? Were you a volunteer, or did they knock on your shoulder, so to speak?

RM: Yes, I was a volunteer. I gave my name saying that I was available, but I wasn't at all expecting to be chosen, and I was very happy when it happened.

JS: Why were you not expecting to be chosen?

RM: The choice is made in New York and I felt that if you don't have anybody intervene on your behalf you cannot have too much hope. That's why I was a little bit surprised. But I think that one of the reasons why, probably, I was chosen was that the UN wanted a certain number of women on this mission, and I think it did help.

JS: And why did you volunteer? Why did you want to go?

RM: I felt that after 13 years in Geneva, having had experience of a big UN office, I needed to go in the field and to see a different type of reality. On the other hand, I also felt it was the duty of UN staff to be available for missions, to go out of headquarters or offices, in Geneva, in Vienna, to the field.

JS: Did you know much about the program in Namibia? Did you know what the background was?

RM: I knew a bit of the background because before being in the UN I was working for an NGO that was dealing with problems of racism. I had been involved myself, in 1974,

as an NGO representative here in Geneva, in the organization of an NGO international conference on apartheid and decolonization. I had learned a lot through that, meeting people from South Africa, Namibia, and other countries from southern Africa. So, I remained interested in the region, although I was not an expert, I had never worked in the UN in that field, but I knew a bit of the background.

JS: And what kind of orientation did you have, if any, or any kind of training, before you actually went to Namibia?

RM: We had here a two-day training. After the first day, they realized they had forgotten to invite me to the training. So, I went to the second day of training. It was useful, especially if I compare with other missions, where there was absolutely no training. It was useful to get some type of information about the whole situation in the country. They gave us some documents, which I read. But the training was rather limited. I would have liked to have a little bit more.

JS: And did you know before you left here what your duties were going to be in Namibia?

RM: No, I had no idea. I knew where I would be posted.

JS: You did?

RM: Yes, I was probably one of the exceptions. By accident, having been in touch with New York with the person who was going to be the regional director. She told me that I would be posted in Karibib, and I hurried to try to get a map of Namibia to see where Karibib was. So, I knew where I would be posted, and that I would be monitoring an election and the whole independence process...

JS: Where is Karibib, by the way?

RM: Karibib is halfway between Windhoek and Swakopmund, in the central part of the country. Near the Namib desert, not far from Walvis Bay.

JS: Not far from Walvis Bay.

RM: Yes.

JS: So, when you got there, presumably you were in Windhoek for a while--was there further orientation there?

RM: I was in Windhoek for a few days. Most of the time we were just running from one administrative office to the other, to get this and that. And the colleague who was assigned with me arrived a few days later. So before he came I tried to do as much as possible. When he came, we finalized the arrangements and we left. We took the car and we left for Karibib.

JS: And what was Karibib like? What were your conditions there?

RM: Karibib is a very small town, although in Namibia it is considered as a city--about 2,500 people with the township. It is a mining town; it is on the main road from Windhoek to Swakopmund. The community is composed, on the black side of the population--sorry we have to speak in black and white--of Herero, and Damara, mainly, some Nama, Ovambo workers coming from the north. And on the white side of the spectrum, both Afrikaners and German, quite a strong population of German-origin.

JS: Were these Germans who had been there from the time of Southwest Africa?

RM: Yes. There were some families with three generations born in Namibia; others who came more recently, in the 1960s, 70s. So, you had different types of German population.

JS: What did you discover that your duties were? What was your work? How would you describe it?

RM: We arrived at the beginning of May, the first days of May. The registration was to begin the first or third of July. So, we had two months in front of us. The first thing was to settle down and get all the equipment and the office. There are always some problems with that.

JS: But you did find an office?

RM: Yes, we had an office already assigned to us when we arrived, but since the UN had not paid the rent the owner refused to give us the keys. So, we had to work out of the hotel, and after a while finally, when he found the money on his account, then we were given the key. We had a very nice office, I must say, a house to ourselves. And then after settling down, we started to visit the area to know the different parts and especially to meet with various authorities, the population, and to start preparing for the registration process. The law had not been adopted yet. The registration law was adopted quite late,. We had to make preparations from the logistic point of view for the registration. So, these two months went very, very fast because we didn't know anything; we had to learn everything.

JS: And how did you get to know the different communities, the German, the South African, and the black?

RM: Well, we went to meet them; with my colleague, we took the car and we made appointments with the mayor, the town clerk, with the religious authorities in Karibib, in Otjimbingue with the traditional chiefs, and we went to see all these people. When it was possible we announced ourselves, and when not we'd just arrive and we'd introduce ourselves and we'd ask to meet people, the chief first. And these people gave us names of other people who it would be important to meet.

JS: And how were you received? You were clearly identified as UN, right?

RM: Yes, that was clear. When we arrived at the hotel everybody was looking at us and they were very anxious to see who would come. One of the things they wanted to know was our nationality, right away, to be able--in their minds--to situate us politically, especially the white population, but not only. So, as my colleague and I came from countries that were at different ends of the political spectrum of that time, it was interesting to see the reaction of the population. It was clear that at the beginning the white population, looked at us with mistrust. In their idea, for many people, the UN was there to make sure the SWAPO would win the election.

JS: And that was true in your area too?

RM: Yes.

JS: What, by the way, is your nationality?

RM: I am Canadian.

JS: You are Canadian. And your colleague?

RM: From Kazakhstan--actually it was still the Soviet Union at that time.

JS: Yes, it was still.

RM: Among the whites there was quite a strong anti-communism, while on the other side, when people of SWAPO heard that my colleague was from Kazakhstan, they said, “Ah! This is great! Brother.” It was embarrassing. But I found that it was a very good thing to assign people coming from a different political spectrum, although as far as we were concerned, we were both civil servants of the UN and our political ideas were not that different from one to the other. But for the perception of the people, it was important.

JS: Was your colleague male or female?

RM: Male.

JS: Male. So, you had the spectrum, but also sexual, so to speak.

RM: Yes, that also was important. And then we had police monitors, who arrived maybe a week after we did, from Fiji. So, that was actually an excitement in Karibib because I think people had never seen a Fijian in their life. These Fijians, naturally, were black, but at the same time, from a different type of origin. They were very friendly, played music and sang, and this created a nice atmosphere.

JS: I want to ask about that in minute, but what difference did it make that you were female?

RM: I have talked quite a lot about that. I believe that it was very important to have a mission where you had, not just a few token women, but at least among the civilians a good proportion of women. It did make a difference in various ways. Naturally when we arrived in Namibia, which is a very patriarchal country, people, at first, especially the Afrikaner farmers, looked at us a bit surprised: "What are these women doing here?" They did not take us very seriously. We had slowly to make our point that we were as our male colleagues, civil servants of the UN and we were coming for a mission. Then it became quite important in the relation with the population. For the women in Namibia I think it was good. They saw women in positions of responsibility. Our regional director was a woman; she was based in Swakopmund; there were several district officers who were women, and I think it did make a difference for the population, for the women in the country. But also inside the mission, the fact that we had a different approach, I found that very positive.

JS: You come from an NGO background.

RM: Yes.

JS: Were there any indigenous NGOs there, or were external NGOs active?

RM: There were some, but actually few. Namibia is a country where the civil society, especially the NGO component, is not very strong, apart from the Lutheran church. And most of the relations that I had with NGOs, were through the Lutheran church. We had a lot of contact with the Lutheran church. I became quite close--not a friendship at first, because we had to be very careful to remain neutral--with a woman pastor, there were two women pastors in Namibia. One of them was in Otjimbingue with her husband, who was a pastor also, and they were both active supporters of SWAPO. So, at first I was a little bit careful, but they were also very active in social work and things like that. I learned a lot from them. There were some international NGOs, but mostly based in Windhoek. Once in a while we did receive a visit from some of these people, but if I compare it to South Africa, where I have also been on a mission, there in South Africa you have a very strong civil society, a lot of NGOs, but in Namibia, not as many. I think it is now improving. But it was not very strong. I looked for them, myself, and really remained mostly in contact with the Lutheran church.

JS: And at the church, did you actually attend services, meetings that would be held in the church, for the population?

RM: Yes, we did have different types of meetings with the population, organized by the church, organized also on farms, by farmers. We had quite good relationships with the farming community. At first they really looked at us with mistrust and even antagonism, but then we developed quite good contacts with them, and they organized meetings with very reluctant farmers and us. I had the advantage to speak German, so that helped also.

The third civilian, a secretary, who was from Geneva, also spoke German; my colleague from Kazakhstan, who was gifted for languages, learned quite a lot of Afrikaans. We managed to communicate with quite a lot of people in the population, even with people from the black population. English was not a very strong language in Namibia, although it is the official language today. The main languages were Damara, Nama, Herero, Ovambo, Afrikaans and German. A certain number of black people spoke German. I had a cleaning lady and I spoke German with her because I didn't speak Damara. So it did help.

JS: So, communication, then, was relatively easy?

RM: It was not too difficult in the day-to-day life. But we had to have the help of interpreters when we wanted to explain things related to our mandate or to the electoral process, especially with the black population, since we did not speak any of their languages. That I found difficult because I felt that there was a certain inequality in the communication: we spoke the languages of the whites but not of the blacks. I felt the limitation of not being able to talk deeply with people, except with some leaders who had learned western languages. But knowledge of languages is not the only basis to communication, although it is important. You also have to gain the confidence of the people for them to feel free to speak to you. This is the first thing we had to do when we arrived. I think that with the time we managed. The town was very small and after a while everybody knew us. We were also lucky to be in an area where there was little violence and tensions.

JS: And how extensive in this area was literacy? Was that a problem?

RM: It was a problem, yes. Certainly, among the black population, especially with the older people. In the township there were schools, so the kids would go to schools, so it was not as strong. But when you went on the farms, there you found a lot of illiterate people.

JS: And was it more prevalent among the women than the men? Or could you make a distinction?

RM: We didn't make any statistics on that. I don't think there was much difference between men and women in that respect on the farms, but probably when you got to the townships then you noticed a bigger gap between men and women.

JS: It is very interesting that the police, the CivPol, was from Fiji. I think there were three contingents, as I understand it: there was the political office, so to speak--you; and there was the military, the peacekeeping; and then there was the police. You all worked together. Did that work well?

RM: We didn't have the military in Karibib. The Kenyan contingent was based in Okahandja, and they would come once in a while to see, "Is everything OK?" and since there was never any particular problem in Karibib, so they went on. Consequently, we

didn't really live and work closely with the military, although they naturally were present. I think the ones we saw most often were the Canadians because they were in charge of logistics. Since our office was on the main road, halfway between Windhoek and Swakopmund, people stopped, at least to go to the toilet, and so we saw quite a lot of people. The Canadians always stopped even if they didn't have anything for us in Karibib. The Kenyans did not come at first. As we came closer to the election, they came regularly asking questions about incidents, about the relations with political parties - and since there were no particular problems, they left.

But we worked very closely with the police monitors, at first the Fijians only, and then, when we came closer to the elections, we got two new contingents: we got ten Ghanaian police monitors and five Canadians. So, we had twenty police monitors for the period prior to the election and for the election itself. I literally lived with the police monitors. Since accommodation was difficult to find, I ended up in a boarding school, a German boarding school, which was closed at that time, with all the police monitors. I was living in the middle of them.

JS: You were safe, then!

RM: Yes, exactly, I was safe!

JS: In other places, the so-called CivPol, in Cambodia and other... Yugoslavia, has been in many ways the most difficult and unsuccessful of the contingents. You found that it worked well in Namibia?

RM: Well, I can speak only for Karibib. I know that in certain areas there were problems. One of them was a problem of communication. There were police monitors from certain countries that didn't speak English, and naturally they didn't speak Afrikaans. Some of them spoke French and Arabic or other languages. Some civilians in UNTAG didn't speak French, consequently communication was a bit difficult. And sometimes there were also some tensions with the civilians. We had some tension at the very beginning of the mission in Karibib, because the chain of command was not clear at the beginning. Who was really the chief of the district? My colleague thought that he was the chief of the district, and consequently he was also the chief of the police monitors. But the commandant of the Fijian police had another idea. He considered that reporting to his Fijian commander, who was in Windhoek, and then through him to the superintendent--I am not sure of the title, he was from Ireland, and was the chief of all the police monitors in Namibia. For him that was the chain of command. He didn't see any in Karibib. At one point, there was a little conflict, nothing very serious, about the nameplate or who should be at the front of the building. But then that was solved very rapidly; we found some compromise and accommodation. But I must honestly say that we never really had serious problems with the police monitors. On the contrary, we developed a good cooperation.

JS: And they didn't have problems with the local police?

RM: No. At first, the local police thought that the international police monitors were there to report on them and so they were very uneasy, and even aggressive sometimes. But then, after a while because the Fijians were so nice, they played music and sang and everybody liked them, they became very friendly with the local police, and the local police would never go anywhere without coming first or calling and saying, "We've been called to Otjimbingue or the township, or to a farm where something happened, please come with us." They even played football together. So, the relationships were rapidly very good. Naturally sometimes there were some conflicting views over an incident, but since we never had serious political incidents, it was mostly cases where somebody was drunk and beat another guy--these types of normal incidents that happen in society. There were however a lot of rumors about all types of things which actually didn't happen, fortunately. If there had been a very strong political tension, like in South Africa, it would have been a little bit more difficult. But in our area, I think the local police realized, after a while, that it was to their advantage to make sure to have somebody from CivPol. Then after that, they could not be blamed for anything.

JS: What was your impression of SWAPOL?

RM: Well, it is difficult to say. At first, there was a mistrust between us. I probably had myself some type of prejudice against them. SWAPO had been involved in dirty tricks, it's clear, so you had to be careful. They could be very nice, but then what was behind? But with the time, I thought, that they were doing a decent job in Karibib. If I compare again with what I have in South Africa with the police, it was not as bad in

Namibia. I think what happened in Namibia was that after a while everybody saw that the outcome was inevitable. The closer we were getting to the election the more people became accustomed to the idea that SWAPO would win the election and that after there would be independence. They were afraid, naturally, of what would happen after, but many people, in the police, the Mayor, and others thought they had better be on the right side of the fence when the time comes.

JS: And the UN was on the right side of the fence?

RM: Well, at first, you see, many thought we were on one side of the fence.

JS: On the SWAPO side, right?

RM: Yes. But then, with time, they changed their attitude because they realized--I think that was quite general, but I can speak for Karibib--that actually, as individuals, we were there to do a job. We were also bound by the same electoral law. And then we got acquainted with our South African partners, or Namibian, or Southwest African. Both my colleague and I stayed the whole time, 11 months in the same place. We had the same partners for the registration and the election. At first, we thought that since they were appointed by the South African administration, we had better watch. We did not feel secure at the registration because we were not well prepared since the registration law had been adopted late. In addition, as far as I was concerned, I was not supposed to be directly involved in the registration, I was supposed to manage the office while my

colleague would be out for registration. But at the last minute I was assigned to a mobile team. So there I was with a typical white man from "Southwest" (of German origin), a very serious person with little sense of humor, who knew the whole region, the languages, and I did not. So I did not feel secure. In a way, he did not feel secure himself. He did not know me and had his own misgivings about UNTAG. In addition, I was a woman and I felt that he did not take me seriously. But by the time of the election, I was much better prepared and felt more confident. We had learned to work together and had gained respect for and confidence in each other. I knew he was not there to rig the election or try to fool me and he knew I wasn't there to make sure SWAPO would get votes. So we were much more relaxed at the election.

JS: So, his chain of command was to the South Africans, what did they call it, administrator general, or something.

RM: Yes, we had two teams. He was the head of the South African team, and I was the head of UNTAG. We were doubling them in a way, watching them; one UN person behind every one of his team, making sure that everything was done properly. When there were questions or problems arising we had to discuss and to decide what to do. Either we agreed on a course of action or we referred the matter higher.

JS: What was he called, what was his title, so to speak, the South African?

RM: In his function, originally, he was the Administrator of a Otjimbingue, which was an agglomeration about 60 kilometers from Karibib, and then when there was an election, I think it was something like the Head of Registration team or something like that. I can't remember the exact title.

JS: And his chain of command was to the South African in charge in Windhoek?

RM: Yes, that's right. The two of us were the head of a team, then there was a regional structure where you had a UN person and a South African administrative person, a 'regional supervisor' or something like that. And then after that it went, I think, to the whole area, and then it went to Windhoek. At each level, you had two people: one from UNTAC and one from the SA administration. And if the problem could not be solved between Mr. Guerdes and myself, then it went up the hierarchy.

JS: Now, were the various political parties active there? SWAPO, but the other parties as well?

RM: Yes. Actually the electoral campaign began quite late. There were two parties that were ready and had prepared themselves: SWAPO and the DTA. The other parties either were very weak or had been created quite recently, so they became active only a few weeks or months before the election--*really* active. So, the battle was between DTA and SWAPO, and the two were strong in our area.

JS: Did Nujoma come there?

RM: He might have come to Otjimbingue at one point, but I don't remember that he came to Karibib.

JS: But he was a known figure?

RM: Oh yes, sure.

JS: Did you have any role as the UN representative in trying to bring about some amelioration of relations between the various groups of society there? Did you bring them together at all?

RM: With the political parties, we did. We had meetings organized to discuss the code of conduct and various other issues. One of the issues in our area was the question of posters--everybody complaining that party X had taken away their posters to put up their own, and this type of thing. There were also complaints of intimidation. We had meetings with the political parties and the population. We had translators. One of them was a teacher, a very brilliant young man. One evening my colleague and I invited him to have dinner with us in the hotel. It was the first time that he was going into this hotel, which before we reserved for whites. We felt that he was not at all comfortable. There were some barriers, which were very difficult to put down, especially for a foreigner. We could not do as if they did not exist and think that we could bring the blacks and whites

together. It was not as easy. Another example was the attendance at church. The only church where there was a service every Sunday was the Lutheran church in the township. I went quite regularly, although I am a practicing Catholic. There was no regular Catholic service, so I went to the Lutheran service, and I was always the only white person in the church. Sometimes I wondered if I was not out of place.

JS: And that's where they had a woman pastor?

RM: No, the woman pastor was 60 kilometers away. In the township of Karibib, they had no pastors. It was the lay people who organized the whole service, men and women together. It was quite interesting. I didn't understand most of what they said because it was in Damara, Herero, Ovambo and Afrikaans. They did it in three or four languages, the different lectures and so on. And the only one I could understand a bit was Afrikaans. But when I was in Karibib over the weekend, I went that church, first because I wanted to go, but also just to be with the people, to hear them singing, and to pray with them.

JS: And that's where they really got together?

RM: Not the white and the black together. That happened on very rare occasions. We had a farewell party in our office at the end of the mission and we invited everybody, blacks and whites. But they did not mix much. We were trying to be very natural, and when there were possibilities to bring the people together we used them, but there was a

wall between them. Years and years of separation. That was one of the most difficult things for me in that mission.

JS: Did you leave with any hope that that was going to change?

RM: Yes. I have some hope. I still have. I went, four years later, to Namibia.

JS: Ah, you did?

RM: Yes, when I was in South Africa. Before leaving the mission in May 1994, I went back. It was 1994, so four years after. There was not much change in that respect, apart from the black government. People—both whites and blacks--found it was peaceful, but the economic situation was difficult like everywhere else. But the division between blacks and whites is still there. I think it will take a long time before it is completely changed, and that will depend on the economic situation, on the possibility for everybody to go to school, to university. There were some changes already when we left in 1990. I could see in a year certain things having changed. I think to a large extent because of the return of the refugees. But in the Lutheran church, where I returned for a Sunday service, I was still the only white person. What moved me was that people recognized me. Some said after the service, "Weren't you here with UNTAG?"

JS: Did you find any degree of sophistication at all about the United Nations? About why the United Nations was there, among the local population? Did they understand what you were there to do?

RM: At first, not very much because they had been so cut off from everything, and the UN had never really been present in Namibia. So, they had very limited knowledge of the UN. We tried to do some type of education, or rather "information," and I think it did help but it was difficult for them to understand what the UN was. It was an organization... It's clear that maybe people of the SWAPO were more sophisticated--I am talking about the leadership. The fact that the UN had supported SWAPO, and that some of these people had been abroad, like these two pastors in Otjimbingue, had enabled them to be in contact with international politics. So, you could find among the leadership of SWAPO, even people who had never left Namibia, some type of knowledge. But for the rest, the other parties, it was an organization to Namibia to support SWAPO, and to make sure that it would win the election.

JS: I see. Were the whites aware that the UN General Assembly had declared that SWAPO was the legitimate representative of the country?

RM: Oh yes. Many of the whites, especially those who were in leadership positions in towns, knew that. That's why they were so careful at first, and even aggressive against us. Some of the farmers had said, "If these people come on my land, I am going to shoot them. So, they had better not come on my territory without asking permission." So, we

had been told to be careful. The first time we went to a farm, the woman wouldn't even open the gate, but after that we developed very good relations with them. They changed, you know!

JS: Now, I judge from what you said that you didn't really have security problems. The so-called "Koevoet" was not there?

RM: No, we didn't have serious problems. I don't remember any big incidents involving Koevoet. There were constantly rumors that the Koevoet were here, that something had happened there, that they were trying to do this and that. It was mostly in the north, where they had a lot of problems in the beginning with them. But in our area, I don't remember specific incidents; maybe police monitors would remember something where it seemed likely that the Koevoet were involved, but since we didn't have any big political problems, it did not make an impact. But it is clear that in the north they were present and continued to do quite a lot of things, at least in the first months.

JS: Now, was there any movement of the refugees back into your area or not?

RM: Yes, we had a whole group of refugees in the area of Otjimbingue, 60 kilometers from Karibib, where these two pastors were. They received a whole group of refugees.

JS: Did that cause tensions in the society?

RM: It did. It is a very poor community, with little information and education, for most of them. There were two chiefs there, the Herero chief and the Damara chief. We went to see them also. Between the two pastors and these two chiefs, there were tensions because they supported different political parties. And naturally, these returnees were all perceived as SWAPO supporters. Some people said they were Angolans and not Namibians. There were tensions there. It was the time where there was the most tension. I did the registration in Otjimbingue, and naturally all these people had documents from the High Commissioner for Refugees and I was a little bit concerned that this would create problems with my colleague, Mr. Guerdes, but no, it went well. After that the tension went down a bit. July was the most difficult month for us.

JS: Was the High Commission for Refugees active in helping them to reintegrate?

RM: Yes. They were, but most of the people who were in Otjimbingue did not intend to stay there. It was like a temporary resettlement, they were not even from that area. Most of them were Ovambos from the north. Many of them left even before the election.

JS: Could you, just to give an idea, what was your typical day like there?

RM: I would get up at about 6:30, and go to the office at around 8:00. One of the first things we did was to try to get the newspapers. Since there were very few newspapers published in Namibia, it went very fast to read the newspaper to see what was being said. During the registration and the election we didn't have the time to read the newspaper

every morning, since we had to leave sometimes very early to go to different areas. Outside of these periods, we had meetings, sometimes among us, the three civilians, sometimes with the police officers, sometimes we had regional meetings either in Swakopmund or Usakos. We visited areas, addressed groups of citizens (farmers, church groups, etc.) with the help of interpreters.

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RM: We prepared reports, which we faxed to our regional office. We had to deal also with people coming to the office for all kinds of things. We had administrative work to do; we had local staff, and sometimes we had problems with the local staff. We had to hire somebody else. It depended. Some days we spent mostly in the office because he had scheduled meetings. Sometimes we were completely out most of the day and came back in the evening to wind up business. There was nothing to do in the town itself, in the evening. There was one hotel, but nothing else. So, in the evening, six o'clock, the sun goes down and then you go back to your living quarter, you eat, you read, you write letters and look at the stars (they were beautiful!). It was very peaceful, I must say!

JS: Now, you mention newspapers. UNTAG had a rather extensive communication or information program. Did those programs--did the radio, did the material that was being put out in Windhoek--reach the population there?

RM: Yes, I think. I will give you an example of something that surprised me. One Sunday, I went to the religious service at this church. In that township there was a type of a school for young girls, for social work or something like that and, after mass, I sometimes went to speak with some of the teachers there. One Sunday they asked me if I would come to tea with them and with the young girls, there were about twelve of them. I had taken a few T-shirts, but I didn't have enough for everybody, and they all wanted to have an UNTAG T-shirt. It must have been shortly before the election. So, I said "OK--I will ask you a question and the first one who can reply to this question will receive a T-shirt." I said to myself, "What question am I going to ask? Who is the head of the UNTAG mission?" – No, everybody knows it is Mr. Ahtisaari." So, I asked them, "Who is the head of the military component of UNTAG?" It was General Prem Chand. I thought this was a little bit more difficult so maybe just one will have it. And then, three or four girls replied at once, "Fred Eckhart!" I realized that they were listening to the radio because Fred Eckhart had a program every day. So it did have an impact. Fred Eckhart was better known than Prem Chand.

JS: Eckhart was the spokesperson.

RM: Yes, he was the spokesperson. But I was surprised that these young girls knew his name so well. So I think his program did reach people after a while. I think at first what was more useful were the T-shirts and the buttons and things like that. Then the radio programs started. They were given in Damara, Herero, Ovambo, and so on. Since a lot of people listened to the radio, I think with the time it filtered down. But I could not

judge to what extent it was really listened to by the population, maybe in some farms--I don't know. That wasn't clear to me.

JS: You say Ahtisaari was a well-known name?

RM: Yes.

JS: Favorably known or not favorably known?

RM: Well, it is clear that at first with the white population he personified the whole support of the UN for SWAPO. He was known because he was supposed to have come already to Namibia. So, his name had been linked with Namibia for quite a while. In addition, the Finns, as missionaries, had been linked with Namibia for a long time. But apart from that, I haven't heard anything negative against him personally. I would say on the contrary--as a person he was open to people. Certainly there were controversies with political parts, especially at the beginning with the events of 31 March 1989 in the north, and we will never know what exactly happened and who started it. Then naturally SWAPO was furious against him. But his image in my opinion, from what I could see, was rather positive, apart from the political controversies, which obviously he couldn't help. There were even Namibian children (blacks) from around 1978 who had been named after him, I was told. I never met any myself.

JS: Can we talk now a little bit about the registration? How did you do that? How was that handled? Was it done in the UN office at all, or outside the UN office?

RM: It was done outside the UN office. Registration started at the beginning of July, and went on until the 15th of September. It was extended by one week to be sure that everybody had a chance to register. There were permanent posts where people could come. One of them was in the city hall in Karibib. And then we had a mobile team. This mobile team was based in Otjimbingue for a while, and people could come there to register. And then after that we started to go wherever we were called. We could go anywhere. If my colleague Mr. Guerdes from Otjimbingue heard that on farm so-and-so there were people who had not registered yet, and had no means of transport, he called me and off we went. I packed my things, and left with the driver and the interpreter. Or the other way around: somebody came to the office and said, "On this farm, the farmer doesn't want his workers to register." Then I called Mr. Guerdes and told him what I had heard and asked him to inquire. His relationships with the farmers were better than mine.

What we did also was to go to the farmers' association, with which we had good relations, and we said, "We heard that, we don't know if it's true. We'd like you to inquire." The farmers' association was very eager to show that they cooperated with the process, and were not the ones who wanted to derail the process. They also wanted to change the image of the farmer population, which was considered to be conservative, rightist, racist, and opposed to the independence of the country. Those who were the leaders were more enlightened. Or they were maybe more opportunists. They wanted to be on the right side of the fence. They would inquire themselves, and sometimes they

would say, "Yes, we know him, he is a bit of a hard cookie but we will speak to him."

And the first thing you knew, we were asked to go on this farm and register people.

JS: And did you try to go out and tell people how important it was that they register?

RM: Sure. We went with our interpreters to different places, we organized meetings, and we said it was important. Actually we didn't have too much problem convincing people. There were some--because they were old or they had no means of transport--but the big majority of the population wanted to register, and some people walked kilometers and kilometers to come to register. We even had a man who was one hundred and one years old who came to register by foot! We walked I don't know how many kilometers. People were eager to register. And the political parties, also. So, the political parties went out of their way to get the people to register.

JS: And when it came to the election, how did that work?

RM: The election went even better than the registration. Although there were a lot of rumors and some people had been saying from the beginning that whatever the outcome of the election was, there would be a civil war after, because if SWAPO won, the DTA would not accept it, and the other way around. "It's going to be a blood bath," some said. But the closer we were to the election, the less tension we had, and the week of the election went like a dream. I think it was in the whole country the same thing. It went like a dream, as in South Africa, for that matter. For the blacks, the day had finally come

where they were recognized as human beings. And for the whites, the day had come and they had to go through it.” And after all, all this violence that was supposed to happen did not happen. After the election, I have never seen in my life such a peaceful country. It was like a relief--a relief that nothing had happened.

JS: And does the UN get some credit for that, among the people?

RM: Yes. We did. After the election, when everybody was relaxed, we heard many people thanking us, from all sides, as if we had been responsible--although I am much more modest. I am not saying, “thanks to the UN, everything went well.” I think it is thanks to the will of the population, also. But in a way, I was surprised--even some people who had been very, very negative to us at the beginning and for quite a long time, became much more friendly, and thanked us. I remember the last day of the election. The election had been by one day and there was practically no one coming in polling station. The two teams were there and we took pictures. I have pictures with the team of Mr. Guerdes and with Mr. Guerdes. He made a speech, and he said how much he had appreciated to work with me. I couldn't believe it! He even mentioned that it had been a good experience to work with a woman! And after that I made a speech to say how much I had appreciated to work with him and his team, because we had been together from June to November. We had people from all sides who came to thank us.

JS: Were there quite a few volunteers that helped with the election monitoring?

RM: Yes. We did receive, in UNTAG, new people--civilians, naturally – and also police monitors who came especially for that. In the team, we had civilian police monitors, and military. There were again for the election, mobile teams, where we camped outside. I was the head of the team, and they were all men, so at first I thought, “Oh my goodness, what's with the military!” I knew the police monitors, because I had been working with them. But I thought maybe the military look down at a woman. But I learned quite a lot of things about the military. I don't come from a military family, and I think I had some prejudices against the army. I learned quite a lot about military and police. I found it interesting to have made this experience, and a certain number of my prejudices have disappeared. One thing that is interesting with military and police is that they have a sense of hierarchy. Once somebody has been officially appointed as an authority, they obey and you have much less problem with the police monitors and the military than you have with the civilians--although I didn't have any problem in that regard in my team. I know in some of the teams there were problems, and most of the problems were among the UN civilians.

JS: Now, I want to go back a minute to the political parties. You mentioned the code of conduct, which was basically worked out by UNTAG. That had an effect?

RM: It had an effect, yes. Because it was something clear, that had been agreed by the parties and had been signed, so then you came with that and you said, “OK--all your leaders have signed this code of conduct, and then we are responsible to see that it is implemented,” and then we could have discussions with them. The fact of having

something clear that had been agreed, even if people were not always abiding by it, I think it did have an effect. I had the impression also that it brought seriousness to the whole process. I found it was a good thing.

JS: It was useful?

RM: Yes.

JS: At one point Pérez de Cuéllar came there, and in Windhoek I think he met for the first time with the representatives of all the different political parties. Did that circulate? Did that get through to the population at all?

RM: I remember he came, and was involved in something in Windhoek. But I don't remember that it had an impact, although we were not that far from Windhoek. But it could be that I don't remember, I don't know.

JS: I don't either. I can tell you that some of your colleagues, the one in Windhoek said, "Yes, it had a very great impact." The ones outside said, "No, it had not."

RM: To my knowledge, no. There were other events that had much more impact.

JS: Such as?

RM: Such as what was happening in South Africa. The election of Frederick de Klerk on the 6th of September 1989. I think that also helped, because then the Afrikaners, the South Africans who were in Namibia, and some of the people who had said “Well, in any case, if it doesn’t work out well here, we will go back to South Africa.” Although at first de Klerk was a little bit prudent, but still they were feeling that something was changing. After that, another event that certainly had an impact--not on the election directly, because it happened during the election--was the fall of the Berlin Wall.

JS: Really?

RM: It was right in the middle of the week. I don’t want to say it had an impact on the local population, but all of a sudden, for some of these white people who were anti-communists, they saw that things were changing. So, I think it had an impact, especially on the German population, because they were so close to that, and clearly in favor of it. The un-banning of all the political parties in South Africa, the release of Nelson Mandela, who came for the independence of Namibia--all that had a great impact on Namibia. These events happened during the time of the negotiations for the constitution, and you could see all these changes happening. You could feel a change.

JS: Even there you could feel the change of these external events, then?

RM: Yes. Even then. Seeing what was happening in South Africa, the whites in Namibia were starting to think, “Maybe we had better stay here!”

JS: You said this was close to Walvis Bay. First of all, was there any awareness that Walvis Bay was not going to be included in Namibia? Was there sensitivity on this issue?

RM: Yes, there was sensitivity on this issue, because it was so close, but not everybody was aware of that. Many of the people who lived in Walvis Bay--I am talking especially about the black population--considered themselves as Namibians. We had cases where people came to register from Walvis Bay, and so the question was, "Where were you born?" "In Walvis Bay." "Oh, you were born in Walvis Bay. You know that people born in Walvis Bay do not have the right to vote unless they can prove that they had at least one of their parents born in Namibia?" There were several people who didn't know, and they were shocked that they couldn't vote in Namibia. Then, they went back and they tried to find some papers to prove that their father, their mother was born in Namibia in order to vote. There was sensitivity on this issue, and it seemed therefore to be so illogical for everybody, but it was a fact and one had to deal with it. I think in the population there was some hope or maybe sometimes conviction, that with time "we would get it back," which happened a few years after.

JS: I think I know the answer to this already, but as far as your personal safety, you were never concerned there, or were you?

RM: No. Never. After the incident in Outjo, in August 1989, where a grenade was thrown in the UNTAG Outjo office and one local security guard was killed, a mission was sent from UNTAG HQ in Windhoek. All of a sudden they started to get excited about the security of the staff, and they sent a team, to examine all offices to see if they were safe. As we were on the main road, they decided that we needed some bars on the windows of the office. They visited our living accommodations, to see how they were. When they came to mine, they stayed only five minutes and said, "Well, I don't think you need to worry." They saw all these police monitors around! So, we were never concerned about our security. I don't remember having been worried. There were a lot of rumors, and sometimes you thought, maybe something will happen. At the beginning especially, because we didn't know the people and the country.

JS: Living conditions in general--I ask this because most of you, including you, had not had field assignments before, and this was a very different type of place from Geneva or New York. Did you find it difficult to accommodate to the different climate, the different situation there?

RM: I had prepared myself for something hard, and I had taken some equipment, which I never used, actually, thinking that I might live under a tent or in some very hard conditions. I imagined much worse than what happened. It was not necessarily the same thing everywhere. Some people lived in houses, which were much better than what they had in Geneva. I lived in something very, very simple. It was a small flat inside a school residence, usually reserved for the teacher. There was a small living room, a kitchenette,

and a bedroom with a bathroom, in which there was a bath and a shower, so you couldn't ask for more than that. It was very simple, but everything I needed, I had. Some people who came from Windhoek said, "Oh my dear, you are poorly accommodated." When I went to their house in Windhoek I thought, "Oh my dear, how luxurious!" I mean, I was very happy in my flat.

And then the climate was perfect. I think health-wise, most of the people were much better than in New York and even in Geneva. It was dry. No main problem for me, from the health point of view.

JS: So, morale-wise, how would you characterize that? Not just for yourself but for the other colleagues that you knew. The morale of the UN people, not the CivPol, but the staff people like you.

RM: I think better than at headquarters in general. Yes. The only thing, which was difficult for some of them, was to be away from their families. There were also sometimes conflicts between people, because they would feel stuck in a small place with one or two people that they don't get along with. In some offices, they had inter-personal problems. But apart from that I think the morale was much higher than at headquarters and other main UN offices. You also had the impression to do something useful, to participate in an historical event.

JS: And you have already said that you went back. This is an interesting phenomenon because it is true of a good many others. You developed almost an affection for the place?

RM: Yes. From different points of view: from the point of view of the population, it is in general a very peaceful population, and I still have contacts with some people, blacks and whites. Although people don't write much. And then the country is so beautiful. You get fascinated by the scenery. You realize that only when you leave the country. It is a very strange country. When I speak with colleagues that have been in Namibia, we all have the same feeling, it is like having been in another world, on another planet. I wouldn't say a "paradise" but in an area where you had a lot of things which made you feel good and happy, and also because the outcome was positive. Maybe all that would have been put in second place, if at the end you had had a civil war and you had been obliged to be evacuated from the country, or six months after you had left, the whole process had collapsed. I think we would not feel as good about it, but the fact that it went well, it ended peacefully, the country is still peaceful, makes you feel good. Naturally, they have problems like every country, but I mean it is still working.

JS: And again from your point of view, outside of Windhoek, what was your assessment of the effectiveness, the efficiency, of the UNTAG operation as a whole?

RM: When we were there, we complained about a lot of things that were not working. That is true: a lack of training--that's key, a lot of people came there and they didn't even

know the difference between one political party or the other, but I have seen worse in other missions. There had been a long preparation for that mission, so at least there were a certain number of people who knew what they were talking about, so you felt that this mission had been thought about. So, even though there were a lot of things which had not been prepared properly, and we had complaints, but going back and looking at it, comparing with other missions, I would rate it certainly above average as far as organizations is concerned.

JS: And there was no evident widespread corruption?

RM: In my area, I don't remember that we had cases where we thought there was corruption. What shocked me more--I know there were some cases in Windhoek and there were some investigations. We had in fact one case. I remember that a police monitor disappeared with a ventilator, one of these great big fans. He was transferred somewhere else, and then this ventilator disappeared. We were told that he sold it to somebody else. And this police monitor was not coming from, let's say, a poor country! We heard that there was an investigation. There was a big row about this ventilator. This is the only case that I remember from Karibib. But since the guy had gone some place else, I didn't follow that.

What shocked me more was how careless people were with the possessions of UNTAG: cars, stationary, et cetera. When we came to the end of the mission, we had lots of stationary left over, and different other things, and then my colleagues and I were very eager to bring everything back to Windhoek, and not keep even a pencil which

didn't belong to us. So, we made an inventory and recorded every pencil left. We wanted to bring them back to Windhoek, but they didn't want it in Windhoek. They said, "Not only do we not need this, do what ever you want with it." I was really shocked. I thought these things could be used again for another mission. And so we said, "What do we do with it? We have a lot of things, pads, staples, pencils, toilet paper, et cetera." And they said, "Give it to the population." So, we made boxes, and then we had to be careful to distribute it evenly, not all to the black people or the white people or people from this part, although the election was over. With our boxes we went to Otjimbingue and said, "Oh, we though that you might like some stationary and other things." We went to the mayor's office, because we had seen they were not all that well equipped either, and we said, "We have some left over, would you be interested?" "Oh, yes, yes, yes." And then we went to the township, to the church. We gave not only paper, we had all types of equipment that they didn't want back. So, we distributed that very systematically.

JS: Which was a good thing for the country?

RM: Oh, they were very happy! And then after that we had a big farewell party, and everybody came!

JS: So, those are the main questions that I have. Is there anything that strikes you that you feel was really almost unique in your experience, which would be useful for people to know in the future?

RM: In the mission, or in general?

JS: In the mission.

RM: When I came back, one of my convictions was--and even after the mission in South Africa maybe I am even more convinced about that--but I remember when I came back from Namibia I had one obsession, something I told everybody: I said "I learned through this mission that a civil war is not a fatality. It doesn't have to happen. There are no countries where you can say 'Well, it had to happen. It couldn't be otherwise.'" Violence is something that you can avoid. It is prepared, so you can prepare in a different way. I am convinced now that you can avoid civil war if measures are taken early enough, if attention is given to difficulties and conflicts. It was my conviction there, and that's why I find Namibia was so good from that point of view: not only the UN had achieved what it was made for, but the people themselves. In South Africa it was a bit different because there was only the people themselves, the UN had no real impact on the election process. That's my conviction, which I continue to share, because there could have been a civil war. Everything was possible. But it did not happen.

JS: It is an indication of how one might go about other situations if you had the same time to plan and the same resources.

RM: There is something, when I think of it, which we could have done more in Namibia. It is to have more contact with the population, much more with the local population. Although we did it, and the fact that we were living in a small town, we did meet people, but I think we should do much more in that respect to reinforce those in society who are for peace. Identify them, to know who is who. I think we should do much more of that.

JS: Thank you very much. This is a very useful interview I think.