

Yale-UN Oral History

Hage Geingob

Interviewed by: Jean Krasno

March 10, 1999

Windhoek, Namibia

Jean Krasno: This is an interview with the Prime Minister of Namibia. It's in the Prime Minister's Administration Building in Windhoek, Namibia, and it's an interview with Mr. Hage Geingob. And so to begin with, Mr. Prime Minister, for the record could you explain where you were born and educated and how you became involved in the movement for Namibian independence?

Hage Geingob: Well I was born on the third of August, 1941, in the Grootfontein District. That's a Northern town – Northeastern town. I went to school, initially, to Augustinium. You have only one secondary school for blacks at that time. They were Lutherans. And I went to that school which was at that time located in Okahandja – small town now, 60 kilometers from here. And after taking teachers' training course there I went to teach in a town called Tsumeb, which is now known as Macomaticalo, that's my home town. It's a copper town. So I taught there. I started my political activities there in 1962. After teaching only for one year, I realized my shortcomings in education, and that time the United Nations passed a resolution, after the 1960 landmark resolution on decolonization [UN resolution 1514, Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples]. So, South Africa was always

supposed to argue that if we didn't have education, how can we demand independence. So UN set up the South West Africa Fellowship Program in 1961-62. So after we learned about that possibility of getting scholarships, myself and a few of my colleagues started to walk to Botswana, because we were afraid to apply for passports; we weren't going to be given passports at that time. So we thought we should just walk. And we hitchhiked to Gobabis from Tsumeb, and from there on we went with a hired car to the border. And then we crossed the border by foot, and we had to walk much in the desert until we reached the town called Oshihitua on the Botswana side. From there, of course, the exile life started in '62 – December '62. That's how my exile life started, when I was pretty young. Politically, here, of course I was active. I was the prime secretary of SWAPO in my town Tsumeb, but the activities were not as it later on became to be. They were muted at that time. We had the petition at that time. We received a copy of the UN mission, in Tsumeb. And the first UN missions were sent here, and when we went to deliver a petition for that, we were harassed by South African Police as we went to see Alba and the Alba's Mission.

JK: So the UN had a Mission here in Namibia.

HG: 1962.

JK: In 1962.

HG: They just came –

JK: They came.

HG: It was on mission; they came to visit.

JK: They came to visit.

HG: To visit.

JK: I see, yes, okay, and then you went to meet with them.

HG: I went to meet – well not only me, with other colleagues, so we could petition, because they were given names of people to see. And we thought those were not representative enough. So we gave them a list of the names of real people we thought should be seen also, but because of that we received a little bit, some kind of harassment and so on. And that's when we left. I was already leaving to go and avail myself of the educational facilities. So I left. I stayed in Botswana for one year and four months – the toughest time of my life, because Botswana was, at that time, not yet independent. Conditions were very harsh, difficult, but I suffered there for one year and four months. So I always was quoting one of my teachers, who was saying: “the fruit?” – what is it? – what is this thing of a tree that goes down?

JK: Oh, “the roots.”

HG: “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruits, they are sweet.” He used to say that. So I was always remembering that.

JK: That’s a very good quote, yeah.

HG: Yes, I was always remembering that. I had to suffer for education, but I was told by a teacher that: “The roots of education are bitter, but the fruits, they are sweet.” So one day I am going to reap the sweetness of education. Encouraged by that, I suffered and then ended up in Congo – Congo, today the D.R.C. [Democratic Republic of Congo].

JK: So what year did you go to Congo?

HG: ’64. UN was still there.

JK: The UN was still there. Oh my gosh!

HG: Yeah, so I met UN people first. By then I had a UN scholarship offer to go to Ghana. So I had that letter, and I thought: “Once I go to UN people, I will be helped immediately, and I will be gone to go study.” So I went first time to UN Headquarters, there. I gave the letter, was well received, officially received. I said: “Oh, thanks God. My problems are now over.”

JK: All right, so you went to the UN Headquarters in Kinshasa?

HG: Kinshasa, that time – 1964.

JK: Yeah, was it Leopoldville or Kinshasa?

HG: Leopoldville, that time, Congo, Leopoldville. Yes, they used to call it that.

JK: It was still Leopoldville.

HG: And then I met an Ethiopian gentleman who was in this office. He received me very nicely. He said: “Oh, I will send the letter along” –a telex letter at that time. “I’ll send the telex letter to the Headquarters, and once I get a reply, I’ll call you.” I was so excited. I didn’t know how long the beauraucracies of the United Nations take. I told him that I don’t have any food. I don’t have any place to sleep. So I thought, “My problems are solved.” It took one month to go there, once I came.

JK: Oh my gosh!

HG: So I was taken out from refugee camp, suffering there too. And then all of a sudden I had one hundred dollars – US dollars – and that was a lot of money. My representatives took it. We went to the UN to exchange it for local money and he gave to

us millions of the papers -- useless paper. So I thought I was a millionaire all of a sudden, and I went to buy a suit and shirt. All my millions were gone.

JK: Oh, because of inflation!

HG: So I stayed there not that long, but fortunes are there sometimes in one's life, so I accompanied one of the Mozambican representatives, Frelimo. There was an American gentleman who was touring the area around to interview with this year's scholarship students, and my representative didn't mention my name when he went to see that man. His name was Bob Stevens – Robert Stevens. I cannot forget his name. So he interviewed my representative – SWAPO Representative Mr. Shipanga [Andreas Shipanga – SWAPO official]. He never mentioned that he had students and politicians there too. So I accompanied this Mozambican fellow. They were talking about scholarship possibilities and so on and so on, about Mozambicans. Then he asked: “Is he also from Mozambique?” And I said: “No, I'm from South West Africa.” – that time, the name was South West Africa.

JK: Yes, right.

HG: I'm from South West Africa. Then he said: “Are you interested in studies?” I said: “No, I am, but I have already a scholarship. My boss didn't mention my name, but I prefer to go study. I suffer for too long.” And so he said, “What is your background?” I gave him my background – my very poor background, academically. He said: “Well,

you are better-off than many Namibians – South West Africans -- we have already interviewed. So why don't you fill out this form.” So I filled out the form –

JK: Oh my goodness!

HG: In about one-week's time – In fact, I am so proud, I boast that my scholarship was authorized by telegram by Dean Rusk [U.S. Secretary of State], signed by him.

JK: Really, by Dean Rusk?

HG: Yes.

JK: Oh my God.

HG: So, from there I was taken into one of the American Ambassador's residencies – because I was in the refugee camp -- taken up there with my colleague I brought in, Mazier Shicongo – he passed away, but he was studying there, too. So after about two, three weeks, on the third of April, 1964, I boarded a Pan Am jet – the first time to board such a big plane – and then crossed out of the country to the United States, arrived there, and then went to Lincoln for testing and so on and placement, then went to Temple High School. There was a high school, Temple Prep School. It was a high school. So, tested there, and I started my one-year to make up for the deficiencies -- for one year -- and graduated and then went to –

JK: So what school did you attend in the US? You attended Lincoln?

HG: Temple. Temple.

JK: Oh Temple.

HG: Temple, yes.

JK: Temple High School.

HG: High school preparatory where you prepare to pass the test for a high school diploma, in order to make up the deficiencies: English, mathematics –

JK: Yes, right, okay.

HG: And thereafter I went to Manhattan, because in June 1964, our President now of this country – he later became our SWAPO President. President Nujoma appointed me as a representative to America at the UN, as a petitioner. So our Foreign Minister, now, was my deputy, and he did well. So three of us were appointed to be representatives in the United States and at the United Nations.

JK: Okay, all right, and in what year was this that you became the Representative?

HG: 1964.

JK: In 1964, okay.

HG: 1964. So, I had to be closer. That's why I had to look for a school in New York City, instead of Pennsylvania. So I moved to a small college called Manhattan College – a public school. And I started my university studies there. It was very tough, because it was a very demanding liberal arts college, Jesuit, you know – very, very tough. So you had to study Greek philosophy, Greek literature, Greek history, Greek art, and then select your other subjects. So I said, after a while: “I came here, Father, to prepare for independence of my country. What are these things going to help me?” And then he said: “Well, we cannot change the curriculum for one person. Maybe you have the wrong place.” And I said, well – I had Dr. Melating. We are still in touch. He was a very famous academician and also was the ambassador to the Vatican under President Bush's [Sr.] Administration. So, '65, we met him. He was heading up something called Africa Service Institute in New York. So he knew komos and these freedom fighters. So I met him that way. I was introduced. So he had connections with the Catholic universities. So he helped me, and I went to Fordham University.

JK: So you went to Fordham?

HG: Fordham University, yes.

JK: Oh, okay.

HG: So that's where I completed my B.A. Degree –

JK: And so you were at Fordham in like 1965.

HG: 1965 to 1970.

JK: To 1970.

HG: Yeah, 1970.

JK: My husband graduated from Fordham.

HG: When was that?

JK: A little later, in the early 1970's.

HG: Yeah, I finished in 1970.

JK: Yes?

HG: Yeah, I did at Bronx campus --

JK: Yes, exactly!

HG: I went to Lincoln Center to go in some courses. Lincoln Center, there, was just open, so I went to the Bronx campus.

JK: Yeah, I know Fordham very well.

HG: Okay, so that's my Alma Mater. And then thereafter I went to New School for Social Research.

JK: Did you go there? Oh, I know that school very well.

HG: Yeah, and then during that time, of course, I was doing full-time studies and at the same time also full-time politicking – going to UN in the afternoons, trying to get appointments, not being listened to by anybody. I had to be stopped outside the UN fence, in the yard. I had to eventually get the tactic of getting Ambassador of Tanzania, Manisila and Monga who was from Zambia to say I'm going to see them. And that's how I was being allowed in – very tough. So when I went – after we were recognized as Observers – I nearly cried when I saw SWAPO seat there, on the floor.

JK: Yes, as Official Observers.

HG: I was so touched, because I was being locked out, and I said, “One can make progress in these things.” And when I went now for the admission for Namibia to the United Nations, because I was honored, I was very happy that I suffered there, and I should be the one to be honored today with the Namibian flag there.

JK: Yeah, it’s only right.

HG: I had a multi-party. I had Katjiuongua with me. I had Nijongo, the opposition party. It is a very multi-party kind of a reputation I keep. I’m very proud that I had to walk up to take Namibian seat first, after I was being locked-out. That was a reward to me.

JK: So now, what year did SWAPO become an Official Observer?

HG: 1972, I think.

JK: In 1972, okay.

HG: Yeah, because all those years when I used to come and petition and would be asked: “Can the distinguished petitioner now withdraw so that we can discuss South West Africa?” Can you imagine? You as an owner of the country will come and petition, then the foreigners will tell you, “Can you withdraw?” so they can talk about your country –

very painful. So when I now -- in 1972 -- I was now assigned to the Secretariat of the UN, and Gurirab [Theo-Ben Gurirab] took over for me as SWAPO Observer. So 1972, I joined the UN Secretariat.

JK: You did? What was your position in the Secretariat?

HG: Well I was Associate Officer, Political Affairs Office.

JK: In the Department of Political Affairs.

HG: Yeah, but I was in the Commissioner for Namibia's office.

JK: And Kurt Waldheim was Secretary-General.

HG: Kurt Waldheim and I took the oath the same day.

JK: You joined the same day!

HG: Yes, same day. Of course, not together, but I boast to say we took it. When he was here I told him that. He knows me.

JK: That's right, 'cause that was 1972.

HG: Yeah, so we took the oath the same day, I tell you.

JK: Same day. Oh that's very exciting.

HG: And he actually eventually confirmed me, because when I took the oath there's a three months appointment – there was a probation. There was a freeze on recruitment.

JK: That's right, yeah.

HG: So the three months, three months. So he had to wait that and appoint me full-time. So I kept on telling him: "You appointed me."

JK: Okay, so you were in the Political Affairs, and what was your assignment? Were you on the African desk?

HG: I was at the Namibia desk. Actually, there was a Special Council for Namibia, because United Nations took the responsibility over Namibia – added responsibility – after the termination of South Africa's mandate in 1966. So there was the idea of setting up a kind of administration, but in the UN System, in the Trusteeship system. So I was in the Office of the Commissioner for Namibia.

JK: I see, okay, okay. So now then, did you begin to work on the Security Council Resolution -- eventually 435 -- that was passed in 1978?

HG: Unfortunately, I did not. We started with many other things. We worked on the opinion, for instance. You see, after the court case was thrown out in 1966, the UN Security Council was trying to clear the name of the Court by taking the case back to the Court for an opinion about the consequence of South Africa's illegal occupation, to the member states. So in 1970 there was a talk. We worked on that very hard to take it back to the Court. So 1971, I was also an Observer at the Court at that time. But then, thereafter, there was a deadlock and I left in '75. I was appointed to be the Director of the United Nations Institute for Namibia, which was placed in Lusaka to try to train Namibians. And I might say proudly that many of the civil servants who had to take these courses are the ones who went through my hands at the Lusaka Institute. Even the man who is today leading the -- as a special agent -- at the court case at the Hague, Dr. Awana -- was a student at my Institute. So it was a UN sponsored institute to prepare Namibians for today. So I went in '75 to set that up at Lusaka, and with many of my colleagues that we went -- Hidipo Hamutenya, Doctor Tjitendero, Mosé Tjitendero, the speaker, we were all setting up that institution.

JK: Right, I understand some things about the Institute, and it was very successful.

HG: Yes, definitely, so we are very proud of that. So I was there during the time they were now formulating the [Resolution] 435.

JK: Yeah, so you were in Angola.

HG: In Zambia.

JK: Oh, in Zambia, of course.

HG: But of course I was advising, back then. I was a member of the Central Committee of SWAPO, a political member of SWAPO, as I am today. So I was being consulted, but I wouldn't say I was instrumental in the 435, because that was the job of the President, Foreign Minister of the day, the Trade Minister of the day, and Minister of Justice. They were the official representation.

JK: They were the ones that worked on the –

HG: The negotiations with the five Western countries.

JK: So when 435 was passed in 1978, was it anticipated that independence would come soon after that?

HG: Oh yes, but you know what I say, which is not a good statement, but knowing the country as I know it today and what I'm doing, what we have gone through, I say sometimes -- which is still a good statement -- that maybe the delay was blessing in disguise, in the sense that I don't think we were ready to come back in 1978. I don't

know what could have happened. And certainly the whites were not ready at that time, to accept the black government.

JK: They were not ready?

HG: They were not ready. So this delay allowed time for both sides: the whites to adjust to the realities that were about to come – psychologically, that is. And those who didn't want to adjust left the country, and those who remained said, "Yes, black government can come, but not a SWAPO government." And us, on the other hand, with the institution that was talking about, we also prepared ourselves to fortify our positions, to be more realistic, etc. So I think our delay was bad. Lives were lost, but it turned out to be good for us that we prepared ourselves

JK: Right, because then independence was very, very successful in 1989, 1990.

HG: Yes, it was. Yes, yes.

JK: So now, did you spend time in Angola with SWAPO?

HG: Yeah, well I was based in Lusaka. I used to go for meetings. I used to go to the front also, to Lubango. When Kassinga -- a place called Kassinga -- was attacked, I was the most senior person in the camp next door to Kassinga. So there was a massacre of the

refugees in a place called Kasinga. The South Africans attacked, hundreds of them were killed at one point. It was a terrible situation.

JK: When did that happen?

HG: That was in 1984.

JK: In 1984.

HG: No, 1978, it was to block the agreement action, resolution 435.

JK: Oh, okay, in '78, it was in reaction to the UN resolution

HG: It was to convince SWAPO to withdraw and so on. In fact, President was -- was in New York for negotiations on 435. The idea was to stop it, maybe to try to say, "we don't agree to 435 or to work out the resolution," terrible situation. So I used to go to the camps and so on.

JK: In Angola there were Cuban troops that were there on the side of the Angolan government.

HG: I was with two camps. I was with Cuban and Russian trainers. They were training me.

JK: Okay. Could you describe the relationship between the Angolan government, the Cuban troops, and SWAPO? What was the interrelationship?

HG: The relationship was very, very friendly one, camaraderie, and for instance, as forces, it was very interesting. SWAPO was sort of regarded as a division. If a SWAPO person is senior, in set up where they are commanding, the command situation, and SWAPO person is the senior one, he commands all other two. As I said, they were working as a team together, as equals, oh yes.

JK: I see, okay.

HG: So for command structure, it didn't matter if you were from Angola or from Namibia. It was a joint operation.

JK: Okay. And when it was decided that the Cuban troops would be removed from Angola, how was that decision taken?

HG: Well firstly, after President Reagan came into power, we thought clearly that it was unfair to have linked the Cuban presence in Angola with Namibia's independence. We thought they were not related and that they don't have any connection. So we thought we will lose in the Cold War situation our independence, actually. So we didn't like it at all. We fought it, but eventually after protracted negotiations and arm-twisting

and so on it was agreed to withdraw the Cuban troops, but only for Namibia also, we are going to implement 435. So this link also worked for us at the end.

JK: Worked for you as well, at the end. And so the Angolan government agreed that the Cuban troops at that point were not needed and it was – I've never quite understood why –

HG: Yeah, well Cuban troops in Angola were there because of South Africa's invasion of Angola. People are missing that point. So if South Africans would have said they were going to leave Namibia and go back, there would be no need for Cuban troops. And actually the turning point was the biggest battle, at Cuito Cuanavale, where SWAPO, Cuba, and Angolan's were fighting, where South Africa was basically defeated in that war. So that was the turning point.

JK: Okay, so that was an important turning point.

HG: Important turning point. I really believe think that. And therefore now the Cubans said, "We will withdraw if South Africans also withdraw. Therefore there's no threat to Angola."

JK: Okay, all right, so that then that was a part of the mutual agreement, and then because that was able to be agreed, then 435 could move forward. Okay, how much time do you have?

HG: I don't know. I have an appointment, but it can be moved.

JK: Okay, if we have a few more minutes?

HG: Yeah, let's finish.

JK: Because of your knowledge of what was going on in that area, in the camps –

HG: That would be for another interview. Let's just finish the present one.

JK: Oh, okay. Well one thing I wanted to specifically ask you, because I think that you're a good source for this information, is that once the resolution was implemented, and independence and UNTAG was to begin on April first of 1989 and the Special Representative Ahtisaari [Martti Ahtisaari, United Nations Special Representative to Namibia] arrived in Windhoek on April first, but then there were stories that SWAPO troops had come across the border from Angola into Northern Namibia the day before he arrived and then more on the day that he arrived. What was going on?

HG: Yeah, firstly the question is confused by South Africa's changing the original agreement. Originally, the plan – if you're going to check it – talks about confinement to base of SWAPO and South African troops. That is the original agreement, in the plan. South Africa then reneged and said, "No, a base is a place from where you are going,

operating, planning, and attacking. So SWAPO doesn't have operational bases in Namibia. They must be confined in Angola and Zambia. It was a big dispute. It nearly made the whole negotiations collapse. So that was going on, and compromise was made by the African individual countries to accept that notion, but SWAPO didn't accept it, because SWAPO was saying: "Where were we fighting from all this time? We were fighting from Namibia. We were fighting in Namibia, as our country. So what are you going to do with our troops, you are going to find inside the country? Because you are accusing us of attacking installations in Namibia, not in Angola. So, how could you say we must be confined in Angola, when the agreement says originally that troops found – South African and Namibian SWAPO troops – must be confined to base in Namibia? So we should be confined in Namibia." So, therefore when now the plan was being implemented, many of the SWAPO troops believed that they are supposed to come in Namibia, there. Those who are inside must surrender to the UN. So they were sitting under a tree, waiting for UN to come, and to confine them.

JK: Demobilize.

HG: Demobilize them and confine them, take over.

JK: To set up the assembly areas –

HG: That's what they thought.

JK: So they came across –

HG: Some were inside.

JK: Some were already inside.

HG: Some from inside and some crossed.

JK: And they come across –

HG: Because implementation was starting.

JK: Basically to come to some assembly area.

HG: Exactly.

JK: So they came across with weapons?

HG: No! That's why they were in Namibia, because they had no weapons.

JK: They didn't come across with weapons?

HG: Some had, but those were inside. Some were inside. And they were sitting under the tree, just waiting, when the South Africans knew where they were and just went and butchered them. And we thought the UN was not well prepared. They should have stopped that.

JK: Okay, so that if the UN troops had been there, already set up with an assembly area --

HG: Yes, exactly.

JK: Then SWAPO would have just come to the assembly.

HG: Disarmed them, and disarmed them, yes.

JK: So their intentions were not to come across and attack?

HG: No, no no. This is a misunderstanding that they said. South African and SWAPO troops were to be confined to base. You can go and look at the plan. It states that, but South Africa, later on, tried to redefine what is a base.

JK: What is a base, okay.

HG: Yes.

JK: So then the South African troops, who were supposed to be confined to base, were—

HG: Those were not confined.

JK: Were released?

HG: Well, I wouldn't say they were released; originally they were not confined.

JK: They never were confined?

HG: Yes, yes.

JK: So they were able —

HG: It was at the beginning of the process.

JK: So they had not actually been confined yet.

HG: Exactly.

JK: So, then they had freedom of movement?

HG: Well, but you see, the implementation day was the first of April. The UN should have come in with force.

JK: But they weren't there yet.

HG: Yes. And we regret that Ahtisaari, as the UN Representative, authorized South Africans to attack because they are saying he authorized it. Those attacks are not because of us.

JK: And there weren't really any attacks being made by SWAPO? They had come across, but there had not been any attacks?

HG: No, and some were already inside the country, we just had not all of them.

JK: Yeah, so in this case, the UN made a mistake.

HG: Yes, and South Africa did it deliberately, to attack, knowing that the SWAPO troops did not have bad intentions. They knew that. They knew these people had gone to surrender according to the plan, but since South Africa objected to that plan, they deliberately killed them.

JK: Because, from the reports that I had read, the people who were killed were Namibian and SWAPO people.

HG: Yes.

JK: Right, so that's why the information that I was getting from other sources, saying that the SWAPO had come with weapons to attack didn't make a lot of sense.

HG: Where did they attack? Where did they attack? They didn't attack. They were sitting under the tree. They did not attack them.

JK: They didn't attack.

HG: They didn't attack anybody.

JK: So the information was false.

HG: It was false. It was repeated again. When we came back, all of us, when we are here from exile – I led the delegation to come back – and Pik Botha was about to attack again. And then Botha had to be called. He came here, and we met him for the first time as SWAPO, and we asked him: “What is this rumor?” We asked him. I asked him a simple question: “Why do you think SWAPO will commit suicide? All SWAPO leaders are here, except Sam Nujoma. Now how can we attack, plan an attack, when we are all

surrounded by you? You'll wipe us out." It just made logical sense. So, he agreed and said, "the same sources that told us that time that you are attacking are the same sources." So he said that it was not true. So he reconfirmed that therefore the first time they were given the wrong information, on which he acted and on which he nearly acted upon again while we were already back. So we asked him, "What kind of sense does it make that all top leadership of SWAPO is back under your valley here, and we will attack them? They'll just kill us. So how could we do a thing like that? It doesn't make sense."

JK: It doesn't make sense.

HG: Yeah, so he admit to it and said it was the same sources that gave him that information the first time. We are still doing studies on that source, who that source was.

JK: Who that source was, yeah.

HG: Some indications are that he had heard that communication from the UN, but I don't know if that's what the official conclusions.

JK: Okay. Well, I know that you need to run off, so I –

HG: Yes, let me say one more thing. Nujoma will recollect this process of how the decision was taken, how it got made. All I can say is that UN was successful here, very successful, but it is because Namibian people were willing to cooperate with the United

Nations. People are missing that point. We're talking about some very difficult management. Citizens must be willing to cooperate with United Nations. That's why it succeeds. Some places it is failing because there is no one willing to cooperate with the United Nations.

JK: Yes, that's right. Well thank you so much, I appreciate your taking the time to do this. Thank you.