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INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS MOLEFE.

Dale McKinley (DM): First of all thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us, for taking your time. Can you just state your full name please?

Thomas Molefe (TRM): My full name is Thomas Rapule Molefe.

DM: Thomas, we want to find out a little more about you before we talk about your present situation. Where were you born?

TRM: I was born around here in the Vaal.

DM: In the Vaal, right down the road?

TRM: Yes, in Evaton.

DM: And you have been here your whole life?

TRM: Yes, my whole life.

DM: When were you born, what year?

TRM: 1944, 15th March.

DM: What were your family, your parents doing when you were a kid, when you were a child?

TRM: My father was employed by Robel Paints, my mother was just a house wife.

DM: And your siblings? Do you have brothers and sisters?

TRM: Yes.

DM: How many are they?

TRM: We are 5 brothers and 4 girls and we are all together 9.

DM: 9 children, that's a large family?

TRM: Yes.

DM: What kind of a house did you grow up in ... that's a large family to be in one place?

TRM: When we are from school we would go through the Indians ... and we used to work part-time there after school - that's how we survived.

DM: Businesses?

TRM: Yes.

DM: What kind of work were you doing?

TRM: We were scaling, but then they we using pounds and ounces. They were having a shop and they were smousing (?). So we used to enjoy doing that for little money, for those little things they gave us.

DM: Tell us a little about your childhood, what kinds of things did you get up to when you were a child?

TRM: We usually didn't have a luxury life like everybody, we used to eat lousy food, even water we used to go and fetch water from far.

DM: So you had no running water in your home?

TRM: No, no, no. There were wells by then.

DM: And electricity?

TRM: No electricity.

Ahmed Veriava (AV): Is this here in the Vaal?

TRM: Yes, here in the Vaal.

DM: And school itself? Did you do well at school?

TRM: Yes I did well. Although it was tough, I even reached to do matric. By then I was given the opportunity by those Indians. It was that Indian school in Pretoria. So we went there till we matriculated and after that, the school closed down.

DM: So it was private school or public school there?

TRM: No, no, it was a private school, an Indian private school.

DM: And your businessman paid for you to go there?

TRM: Yes.

DM: That's quite a long way from home, did you board there?

TRM: Yes, we were staying there.

AV: Where in Pretoria?

TRM: What's it, Kilnerton. It's between Bethal and Pretoria.

DM: Did you think ... was that school considered to be better than the schools that were here locally?

TRM: No, in truth we were missing our community because there it was full of Indians and Coloureds. We didn't have that much freedom for ourselves.

DM: Were you the only blacks there?

TRM: Yes, we were few.

AV: How did other kids treat you?

TRM: ... some treated us well and some badly. So, we cooperated.

AV: When you say badly ...?

TRM: They used to call us names ... we left our community and here we are in their community. So you feel bad especially when you are away from home.

DM: So you were there with brothers, when you say 'we'?

TRM: We, the pupils who were there.

DM: Were any of your brothers and sisters there?

TRM: No, they were schooling around here.

DM: So you were the only one that went from your family?

TRM: Yes.

DM: Where are you along the nine ... are you the eldest, youngest, in the middle?

TRM: I am the eldest.

DM: You are the eldest child?

TRM: Yes.

AV: How old is the youngest?

TRM: Now, I think the youngest he was born in 1960 somewhere. That's the youngest.

DM: And you finished high school there, you got your matric ... what happened when you finished with matric?

TRM: I wanted to further my studies so there was no money by then, at home they couldn't afford. And then I had to look for a work, telling myself that after that I would go back to school here - no more there at that school. By then it was influx control. Although with a little bit of education, but with influx control you couldn't work where you want to.

DM: So you came back home to Evaton?

TRM: Yes.

DM: And you were looking for work here?

TRM: Yes, and then I went to Joburg. When you find a job, like in a factory, they would refer you to a contract or hotels. So I went for a hotel because I was looking for a living.

DM: So you started working in a hotel?

TRM: Yes, I worked at the hotel.

DM: What were you doing there in the hotel?

TRM: I started washing dishes. From there you get promoted by the foreman till I became a porter, a night porter

DM: The hotel itself, what kind of hotel was it? Where was it situated?

TRM: It was corner Kerk and Von Velligh.

DM: It was in down town Johannesburg?

TRM: Yes.

DM: How was it working there in the 60s and 70s? What was it like being a porter? I'm sure it was mostly all white people coming to it?

TRM: Yes. In between them ... at the times you feel inferior, because most of the time we were separated, even when you go sit outside or eat meals, we were always separated. But coming to work...

DM: Did you earn a decent living ... did you think you were earning ... you know, your wages?

TRM: By then there was no money, what we were earning was nothing. We were just working.

DM: Were you still living at home while you were doing this job?

TRM: Yes. I was still living at home. So, helping with a little bit that I have from my brothers. Accidentally I made a girl pregnant, so I had to look after her.

DM: Did you get married to her?

TRM: Yes I did. My first born was born in 1964/63 if I'm not mistaken. So then I must get married with little money.

DM: Did you move out of ... did you get your own place?

TRM: Yes, we had to. Because by then when you get married ... they had influx control. You are an adult now so you must have your own permit, your own family.

DM: Did you move to Evaton?

TRM: Yes, I just moved to Evaton, before there was this Sebokeng.

DM: What kind of house were you living in?

TRM: Mud house, mud bricks...

DM: How long did you work at that hotel?

TRM: 11 to 13 years if I am not mistaken.

DM: Were there any unions at the hotel at that time, was there anything like that in those days?

TRM: We didn't know those things.

DM: What made you to leave the job?

TRM: It was now when they wanted to demolish the Lang Hotel. They were building the Carlton Hotel. So by then we had opportunities because when you have over five years with a company you work for, when you went to look for another job, the influx control they gave you that access to that job that you want. So, that's why I left that hotel and I went to Carlton, I worked for Carlton from there until 1977.

DM: As a porter or a different job?

TRM: No, no, it was a different job because it was lighting, unlike the food place.

DM: From there what happened?

TRM: From there, this place was built. So, they gave us houses by marshal law. We had to get the house, so I had to have my house. I must leave my family, I must run off to come and live with my wife. Luckily when my parents moved in they stayed near us so it wasn't stressful. I kept working there till ... because in SAMANCOR I went in 1983.

DM: So until 1983?

TRM: Yes. So roughly I can say that I worked until 1982 at that place.

DM: How did you get the job in SAMANCOR?

TRM: After leaving that, we were roaming around looking for jobs. So fortunately I got luck and went into SAMANCOR.

DM: By that time now, the union situation is changing, starting in the 1980s ... had you been part of a union at all up until that point?

TRM: No, no, in 1983 the unions, we were hearing about them but when I arrived in SAMANCOR there were no unions. There were only white unions.

AV: Just in terms of the kinds of politics that were going on since the late 1960s up to the 1970s ... what were your impressions of those kinds of things?

TRM: Well those were hard times. We didn't know where you are heading but unfortunately things were changing, life is no more like where you move from up to where you are now .. that's what those changes, those riots ... you could see that now something is changing.

AV: Did you come into contact with any kind of political organisation before you started working at SAMANCOR?

TRM: Yes, we were ... but it was just here in the locations. We didn't go out.

AV: Like what kind of organisations?

TRM: It was called Civil People's Organisation.

AV: What kind of issues were they taking up?

TRM: Changing lives, you know when you changing lives there must be a lot of things to be changed ... transport and all those playing fields. We couldn't play with whites, we couldn't play with the Indians but we were schooled with them, we lived with them. But we couldn't have one organisation to go and play for. You see, that's the things that were struggling us. When things changed we were happy ... because we couldn't enter Rand Stadium when Highlands Park was playing because we were black. It hurts.

DM: Did you follow soccer quite closely?

TRM: Yes, I was playing.

DM: You were playing?

TRM: I was playing.

DM: What team did you play for?

TRM: Here I played for Real Supers.

DM: What position?

TRM: I was playing seven, at times I was goal keeper.

DM: Did you ever think about becoming a full time soccer player?

TRM: Yes, we did, that every boy's dream. We went to stadiums to see those big teams ... we wished one day we could be there but things were not the way we wished ...

DM: Did you think you were good enough to be there?

TRM: Yes, we were.

DM: What was your favourite big team?

TRM: In the whites it was Highlands Park and in the blacks part it was Orlando Pirates. There were only two clubs by then, it was Swallows and Pirates and then in Natal it was Amazulu and Bloemfontein Celtic, those were the big clubs.

DM: Do you still follow it very closely? Are you still a Pirates fan?

TRM: Yes. I even have a membership card.

DM: So, when you started working at SAMANCOR in 1983, what job specifically did you get in SAMANCOR?

TRM: When you arrive at SAMANCOR they will first interview you and see what qualification you have. Some of the guys there, if you find that that you have more qualifications than him they are going to give you a rough time ... at times you will find things on the notice board, everything is written down when you arrived. When there are applications ... that's how we got positions, from down until the middle.

DM: What job did you start with?

TRM: I was just a general worker .. whatever they tell me to work.

DM: When did the union start coming to SAMANCOR?

TRM: I think it was in 1984 if I'm not mistaken. Because there was a strike in '84 and after that when everybody went to the company, so the union was strong by then.

DM: So you joined the union?

TRM: Yes, we did.

DM: Why? Did you join because everybody else was or did you think it was ...?

TRM: I joined it through the (?), things will change through the union. But by the time it went on we found it wasn't as we hoped/thought that the union will work for us that way.

DM: I am assuming that when it first came it was NUMSA right?

TRM: Yes

DM: And it remained that way?

TRM: Yes. Some people appointed us ... I think. I was a shop steward for 10 years there

DM: When did you become ... what year were you voted as a shop steward?

TRM: I think it was from 1986/87 somewhere there

AV: How did you become a shop steward?

TRM: I was in there by co-workers

AV: And why do you think they wanted you as their shop steward?

TRM: Because I was brilliant

DM: What kind of things did you do when you became a shop steward?

TRM: We were representing people who were harassed by the foremen's, by that white regime I'm sorry to say, but it was a white regime. So, some cases we won and some we lost. And some shop stewards were higher than us.

DM: And that was at a time, when you became a shop steward, in the 1980s -1986/87 - when lots of things were going on in the country. COSATU had just been formed in 1985 and COSATU became very heavily involved in the politics of the country. How did you relate to the bigger politics of the union that was happening and all of the struggles in the late 1980s?

TRM: Well, I did join the ... like rallies at COSATU ... sometimes when I was off at work I used to go there and listen. And at times we had meetings .. as shop stewards we met with them, some of the top guys there.

DM: So what did you think of the politics of those top guys, people like Cyril Ramaphosa and the UDF etc.... what was your approach?

TRM: Well, if we were in a bad situation like we were and you met people like them, then you feel at times like you are nearly being free. You wish to be near to them or maybe work with them.

DM: Were you victimised for these kinds of things? What was the relationship with management?

TRM: We were

DM: What happened?

TRM: At times they would tell you when you were making an application for such a position they will ask you to stop being a shop steward. It was victimisation like that.

DM: Just a parallel question. All during this time when you were working as a shop steward, how were things on the family side, on the personal side ... how were things going with your children and your wife and at home?

TRM: The family was also rising at my side. At times, my wife didn't like it.

DM: What didn't she like?

TRM: At times I wasn't at home, went out to meetings. At times you find that when there are strikes somewhere, you have got to go and support that. At times people were arrested and if she doesn't see you coming back to the family, seeing that you are not back, they are feeling miserable until they see you ... or you must phone.

DM: Did you ever get in trouble with the authorities, did you ever get arrested or beaten?

TRM: In SAMANCOR yes, several times we had gatherings there and they used to call the police. We used to scatter because they were giving us dogs. Some of us managed not to be arrested, but some were arrested and the union used to take them out from jail.

AV: You were a shop steward for ten years right? In that time what was the most memorable moment for you as a shop steward?

TRM: My most memorable one is when we were at the rally in Paarl in Cape Town. Everybody, from Durban, from Port Elizabeth you know ... that gatherings of unions/ COSATU – because by that time COSATU was the mother body of every union. I think we were there for two or three weeks.

AV: What year was it?

TRM: 1997/1998

DM: When things, in the early 1990s, started to shift .. the unbannings of the movements, Mandela's release ... did things change at SAMANCOR at all, what was it like to be a shop steward when the bigger political things were starting to change?

TRM: It wasn't so easy but we enjoyed it because everything ... we could use the same canteens ... although it was tough.

DM: So they dropped the colour bar?

TRM: Yes, but it wasn't easy to drop it because those guys, it's in their blood. Some of them couldn't believe we were eating together in the canteen, sharing everything ...

AV: How would they react to you coming into the canteen?

TRM: When you come to the canteen or in the toilet, he will just look at you ... pissed off ... but we were used to such things, we didn't take them so seriously but we knew that everything was changing and really, it changed.

AV: Was there more confidence amongst black workers now that they were speaking to the white supervisors and so forth?

TRM: Not all. Because I think that some, they are not schooled. Because at times you would find that they were still separate on the bus.

DM: And was there any changes after 1994 in the management structures in terms of the racial composition of management, or the attitude of management?

TRM: The attitudes changed, but slowly. You couldn't say it changed fast, but slowly.

AV: In what ways did it change?

TRM: Well, giving some people some higher positions. But it wasn't easy to reach the top because there was still favouritism there.

DM: As a shop steward over those ten years and after 1994, you had made your way up further. I understand that at SAMANCOR there is a lot of different grading .. A1, B1 ... that kind of thing. So what grade did you get up to by that point?

TRM: By the time I left to be a shop steward they elected somebody so I was relieved of this. To be a shop steward is a tough job.

DM: Tell us a little bit about what you did as a shop steward ... the tasks that you were given to carry out in SAMANCOR?

TRM: At times they gave us classes, these white guys. So we went to a class – they gave us like safety ... when we went for safety with some of the foremen's ... but still the attitude was not so good between us and them.

DM: Talking about safety ... all that time as a shop steward ... SAMANCOR is a seemingly a very dangerous place to work. Tell us a little bit about the safety situation there?

TRM: That place, you can't mention because it is too tough. Even now when I remember from that place, it's like a pig sty – SAMANCOR is a pig sty. It endangered our lives but we couldn't do otherwise because we were earning a living for our kids. But that place with safety - safety was only for whites. But blacks ... they used to send we, the black workers, in front where it is dangerous. They didn't go themselves.

AV: Give us an example

TRM: Like maybe when the kiln has got to start, the foreman will send you there, he won't go there, to check up on what's wrong there. When the things start moving he's going there and then the management will say it's him. So, the whole credit goes to him, not to you.

AV: Just in terms of safety here ... would it be the same for blacks and whites?

TRM: . By then there was still (?) about that

AV: Give us examples

TRM: They were wearing white overalls ... we were just given overall and a safety hat and safety boots but they would have safety gear

AV: As a shop steward, did you ever have a campaign around safety?

TRM: Safety representatives and shop stewards ... at times I was both. So I used to work as a shop steward here and on the other side, being a safety rep.

AV: As a safety rep what kinds of work would you do?

TRM: You check every dangerous place, machinery that must be repaired and where people are working. We needed some changes there.

AV: Were workers ever worried about exposure to chemicals?

TRM: Yes.

AV: Were those kinds of concerns ever raised with management?

TRM: Ya, there was. That's why I said when we wanted safety equipment. Whites would be given the safety equipment and we would just be given something to go and work there and come out. So, they can get the production, that's all they wanted, nothing else. Your safety didn't mean anything to them.

DM: Did your experience in SAMANCOR radicalise you ... made you aware of a lot of things that you hadn't been aware of before?

TRM: Some, yes I did.

DM: You said earlier that you had joined the union, but you said later that you find out that the union wasn't ... tell us about the union, NUMSA?

TRM: So they were not reliable ... because if it wasn't for them then we shouldn't be here by now. Because we went out from SAMANCOR not knowing them – the shop stewards who are there with the company, we heard it after.

DM: When you say it was 'them', what do you mean?

TRM: They hired shop stewards other than us ...because there were top guys and when we left they were given the opportunity to open up their own subs(?) there inside ... that's why I call it 'them', and then 'we'.

DM: So, are you trying to say that the union, as NUMSA, cut a deal with the management and left out some of the workers?

TRM: Yeah, some, with the shop stewards ... there was a deal between them.

DM: You only found out about this afterwards?

TRM: Ya, after.

DM: Were you retrenched?

TRM: Yes.

DM: What was the reason given for your retrenchment?

TRM: They gave me a letter that said I would work until February 2000 and what .. so the reason, no reason was given.

DM: What did the union do?

TRM: We went to the union, and there was nothing they could do for us ...

AV: What did they say when you met with them?

TRM: Well, they said, they too, they are also out. Not knowing that they were not retrenched, we were retrenched.

DM: How many of you at that time?

TRM: I think the shop stewards that we left, we left three of them there. Those were the top guys of the shop stewards.

DM: Were just general workers retrenched at the same time?

TRM: Yes.

DM: We've talked to another worker who is very sick, who is dying it would seem from the manganese, as are many other workers. When you were there were you at all aware of any changes for you physically?

TRM: We come with a sad story now (tape changed). We came every time and within a month I would be coughing and going to doctors. And to that extent they said I must go to the company doctor cause I am always sick. To find out that really, I was sick. I was now breathing heavily and at times I couldn't sleep by then. And the concentration with my wife, it was also going you see. Things went up until I use those pumps you know ... now when I go to x-rays, they will say it's asthma and they will maybe check for TB. Yet even now, I am still breathing heavy. So that place killed me.

AV: How long did it take before you started seeing that working at SAMANCOR was affecting your health?

TRM: When I left the company it was six months after that that I couldn't do those things which I was doing before. Like running to the bus, taking a spade and doing my garden. It was now becoming heavy for me. And they took our medicals so I had to do means of going to the doctor ... so I went to the clinics and at the clinics you don't get the same treatment as going to the doctor. Now the thing worsened ... even when the aeroplane, when I'm walking, I can't look up or I will fall down. At this moment I can't squat.

AV: Tell us some of your symptoms, some of the things that are wrong?

TRM: My head, I forget. I can look for my watch while it's on my hand. Secondly, I will just sleep ... when I wake up I will just want to sleep ... what cold water is going to do. So these are the things that I have ... so it's hard now.

AV: And headaches?

TRM: Yes, I do have. And knees .. I am always having to rub them every night, I have to. At times I will just sweat. Even now as I am sitting here I am hot where I am, I could have took off my clothes because I am hot now.

AV: When you were working at SAMANCOR, before you were retrenched – were any other workers starting to feel sick?

TRM: Ya, they were. But we couldn't ... we didn't know what was going on, what was eating us there. People were sick there inside but we couldn't see. And the doctors were in favour of SAMANCOR, the management. When you go to the doctor, for three days, it's too much.

AV: What do you mean by 'it's too much'?

TRM: You have one day, two days but the third day you have to go back to work and yet we're still not fit to go back to work. But the doctor will say that you are fit to go back to work.

AV: How often did you go see the SAMANCOR doctors?

TRM: There were times of taking x-rays .. now when we were under their medical scheme, every three months you must go and check the doctor. So when you don't have medical you've got to change your medical to their – SAMANCOR's – medical, not yours. Because your doctor will give you some extra days. SAMANCOR doctors will say, you go consult today and tomorrow you are going to go to work and yet we were not fully recovered from what we went to him for.

DM: When you were retrenched – that was in 2001 – you had worked at SAMANCOR for almost eighteen years, what did you leave with when you were retrenched (the package)?

TRM: They gave us .. heh, you know these people, they gave me a tie, its written SAMANCOR tie. Nothing else.

AV: You didn't get a retrenchment package?

TRM: Nothing

DM: You didn't get any pay-outs?

TRM: No pay-outs we did, but that was peanuts. I mean, even now I am not yet satisfied with SAMANCOR. Because that money we didn't get it straight ... it came half, half, half ... and we were taxed still, on top of that.

AV: So how much did they give you?

TRM: Roughly I can say, R70-80 000.

AV: And how much of that was taxed?

TRM: About R9-11 000 if I'm not mistaken – yeah, R11 000.

AV: And they gave it to you in increments ...

TRM: Yeah

AV: And have they given you all your money now?

TRM: Yes, I can say yes because SAMANCOR can't give me anything now. When I went there and say it was little money, they will tell me you're mad.

DM: When you were retrenched, how old were you at that point?

TRM:

DM: You were born in '44, so that would have made you fifty-seven? (after some discussion back and forth to figure it out ...)

TRM: You're right.

DM: So when you were retrenched, what did you think you were going to do ... what did the future look like at that point?

TRM: When I look at the scale that they promised I will have when I leave the company it wasn't that way. It was heart-broken. So, the thing that I wanted to come and do here, I couldn't. It was only now those monies to feed my kids, to school them.

DM: And when you were retrenched, you only mentioned that you had one kid before ... did you have another child?

TRM: Yes, I've got four now.

DM: You've got four children ... and what are their ages?

TRM: They're already big.

DM: Did you think that at the age of fifty-seven after being retrenched that you might be able to get another job or that you might be able to work somewhere else?

TRM: No, no. because before we left they told us that they were going to let in new blood. Before we left there was a company from ... it was from Japan ... so their minimum age was from thirty-seven downwards. So where will I be employed, nowhere.

DM: So when you got out and got your package, you sort of considered that that was the end of your working life, that now you are sort of officially retired?

TRM: Yes.

DM: And you wife, what was she doing?

TRM: Well, she was working the Checkers by then ... I don't know what job was she doing. She is still working there.

DM: So she still has a job at Checkers ... is that what supports you now, her job?

TRM: I support myself. She is doing her things, and I will do my things.

DM: So you two have your separate lives?

TRM: Yes.

DM: Okay, that's very progressive

AV: ... while you were working (at SAMANCOR) you were paying into a pension scheme?

TRM: Ya, but when we left it was under Provident Fund.

AV: Was that part of your pay-out or do you collect money from that every month?

TRM: No, it was yearly. We had statements from them yearly, every year we would have statements that we had so much in the fund.

AV: So when you left SAMANCOR did you start collecting a pension? ... I'm trying to find out if you get paid any money apart from what they paid you out in terms of your package ... do you get any money like a pension?

TRM: No, not yet.

AV: Will you start getting it when you are 65?

TRM: Yes. So now I have already made how many applications I can't remember. And they always want medical and I always give them.

DM: Just a few last questions. One thing that we haven't really talked about ... all during this period from the 1990s, you were retrenched in 2001, and now these last few years ... as an ex- shop steward, as a worker – how do you think things have or have not changed in your community where you've lived here. Not just your own life but people generally, your friends, the people you know, the community here?

TRM: Well, all the community here ... all I can say is that by then we didn't know anything about this environment, all this pollution stuff. Although we read it in school, we didn't know that it materialised around us here. Now, you see it materialised here, everywhere in the community. The community are suffering about it .. because when we went ... you can see here that houses here are built by asbestos – unless someone has changed that asbestos – the environment is still low ...

DM: And you joined the retrenched workers committee here ... just tell us briefly about how it is to get justice for the things you think you deserve?

TRM: Yes, well it was hard to get help. When we went we were always together wanting to go and fight SAMANCOR. When it comes there we find we have no strength to fight them until there were people who could help us, people who we could rely on. So that's why it made me to be brave ... even now I am (?) even though I don't see them.

DM: You are now almost at official retirement age .. what do you see for the future for yourself and your family for the next while?

TRM: Okay, not only for my family but for the whole community. So, I don't want them to suffer as we suffered, we parents, because things are not as they are now. Everything is going to change but it is going to change by fighting, nothing just comes around without fighting. So we are going to fight this pollution and all this stuff, and for clean water and the promises that they gave us for everything. The environment must be cleaned up – so that's what I'm striving for, so we can be given a chance to guide these youngsters ...

DM: As the elder statesman?

TRM: Yes (all laughing)

DM: Is there anything else that you would like to say that we haven't asked, or haven't talked about ... anything for yourself that you want to say?

TRM: Yes, what I think ... because now here I am interviewed. The most important thing is that I want to meet the APF guys that helped us to be here, where we are today. So that's my opinion.

DM: Thanks very much.

TRM: Thanks.

MINUTES - 49:25