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Freemasonry – Uniting Men Even During Apartheid

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It is a little known fact that during Apartheid in South Africa there was only one organization permitted to fraternize or socialize with Colored people. This organization is Freemasonry. The author talked with R.W. Bro. Morris Levin, Past Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Africa and a 33° Freemason who was in charge of the lengthy and sometimes candid negotiations, which led to this unique breakthrough.

The process began in 1970 at the Provincial Grand Lodge headquarters, Atlantic House, Cape Town. R.W. Bro. Morris Levin and senior Masonic officials of other constitutions met with over forty Colored men, members of two Prince Hall Lodges, St. Patrick's and Southern Cross, who were anxious to join the Grand Lodge of South Africa (GLSA). (see doc1)

Prince Hall Masonry, which had existed in South Africa for over seventy years, was yet unrecognized by 'Regular' Freemasonry and its members felt isolated from their own Grand Lodge in Philadelphia, USA.

R.W. Bro. Levin describes the Prince Hall Masons as being "top quality material" and "highly cultured people", recalling that most of them were teachers, lawyers, doctors and business people.

Representatives of the English, Irish and Scottish constitutions, which operate alongside the South African Grand Lodge, were present at the meeting and kept informed throughout the process.

The conditions necessary for GLSA approval (see doc2) required the Prince Hall Lodges to fully surrender their Prince Hall charters (see doc3) and sever all connections with the Grand Lodge of Prince Hall. The members would also need to be re-initiated, passed and raised in accordance with the usages and customs of GLSA. They would also be issued new aprons and given GLSA Diplomas, after which they would enjoy the same rights and privileges as all GLSA members.

These conditions were agreed upon unanimously and a document drawn up on 14 September 1973, containing the signatures of all the Prince Hall members, was delivered to R.W. Bro. Morris Levin.

The next step was to present the case to the government. Full membership for Colored people was impossible under Apartheid laws. The Group Areas Act had created separate residential areas to enforce physical separation between races, and the Liquor Act and

Assembly Act effectively banned 'whites' from socializing or drinking with 'non-whites'.

A document of conditions R.W. Bro. Levin recalls as being "very stringent" in order to "overcome the expected opposition from the government" was produced and the decision to go ahead with the proposal was made on 25 August 1973 at a Grand Committee meeting attended by all commissioned officers and officers of the Grand Lodge. R.W. Bro. Morris Levin was here appointed convener of the negotiations.

In 1977, after three meetings with a Parliamentary committee held over three years, R.W. Bro. Levin met with the Committee of Internal Affairs. The committee, which included Adriaan Vlok, Dr. Piet Koornhof, Dr. Connie Mulder, Barend Du Plessis and Eschel Rhoodie, were "for the setup" but Prime Minister Vorster was "dragging his feet".

A letter from the Secretary of Community Development was then received which stated that permit authorization was not required for Colored members to attend a closed function such as a normal Lodge meeting held on property owned by the Lodge.

These allowances were still not permissive enough for Colored people to be made 'fully-fledged' members.

Next, a meeting was held with Prime Minister John Vorster and the head of intelligence, General Van Den Berg who urged the Prime Minister to "move it" and grant permission. Van Den Berg did not mention to Vorster that he was a school time friend of the Grand Master, M.W. Bro. Eddie Conradie.

After four years of hard work by many Freemasons and with much help from General Van Den Berg's involvement, the final breakthrough in negotiations came through an "unexpected support" met during the opening of a home for the aged. Dave Levitan, a member of Lodge Kaapstad, was on "very friendly terms" with Prime Minister Vorster's wife and she was invited to be the Patron of the home. Many Freemasons, including R.W. Bro. Morris Levin, were present at the occasion and support was found from the Prime Minister's wife. After hearing Morris' case - which argued that it was "a worldwide opportunity to show that we are not racist" - she assured him she would see what she could do.

R.W. Bro. Levin, who was Assistant Grand Master at this stage, recalls with a laugh that "the next thing we knew we got a letter granting permission!".

On 19 Nov 1977, in a series of workings going right through the day, the Prince Hall members were Initiated, Passed and Raised at the De Goede Hoop Temple in Cape Town. The first degree working was performed by the Provincial Grand Lodge officers, followed by the second degree performed by Lodge Kaapstad. They then stopped for lunch, after which they reassembled for the third degree, performed by Lodge De Goede Hoop. (see doc5)

R.W. Bro. Levin remembers there were “hundreds of people” and it was “hot as hell”. After all the workings were complete, the new Grand Master, M.W. Bro. S.R Gasson, consecrated the Lodges Perseverance and Phoenix, and a mixed banquet attended by over 400 people followed.

The news of Freemasonry accepting Colored brethren was reported in national newspapers including ‘Rapport’ (13 Nov), ‘Cape Times’ (14 Nov), ‘Citizen’ (14 Nov) and ‘Cape Argus’ (16 Nov). (See doc6)

At this time there were approximately 4500 members of the GLSA and around 50 000 members of its sister constitutions. A circular was sent to all English Lodges by the District Grand Master of the English Constitution saying that it “recognizes Colored brethren of Lodge Perseverance and Lodge Phoenix”, who could now visit any of the sister constitution Lodges. (See doc7)

Through the remaining years of Apartheid, it was possible to "accept Colored and Muslim men as full members and many of them have achieved high office in the Grand Lodge" and "many Brethren of color are currently holding office in Provincial Grand Lodges around the country".