

United Nations Oral History Project

**Olara Otunnu
24 September 1990**

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 YUN TAPE
 SEPTEMBER 24, 1990
 AMBASSADOR OLARA OTUNNU
 NEW YORK CITY
 SUTTERLIN, Interviewer

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JS Ambassador Otunnu, I want to first thank you for agreeing to participate in this Yale oral history project on the United Nations. As you know, the subject of this particular interview is the method of the election of the Secretaries-General. I would like to ask you first for the purposes of the record to indicate what position you were in at the time of the election of Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar.

OT Well, when the process began I was the Representative of Uganda in the Security Council and therefore a member of a body which was discussing this. But by the time the process ended which took some time - that is to say, December '81 - I was then presiding over the Security Council as the President of the council. So it began when I was just a member and it ended with me in the chair.

JS And you say when the process began, how would you describe how this process does in fact begin?

OT It began very informally with members beginning to talk among themselves very seriously of what to do and when to begin the process of the elections, and then it was in September that (I think it was December) we had the first informal meeting. We were discussing other issues but among them was the question of the election of the Secretary-General. And you

could say the process began in September. I don't remember now whether we began balloting formally toward the end of September or sometime in October but the discussion began in September. And then, of course, as you know, the actual process of voting took a long time, I think we had 16 or 18 ballots. What struck me about this was the imprecision about procedure. As you know, the Council is master of its own procedure and so the formal book is still called the Provisional Rules of Procedure and anything which is not in there the Council can pretty much improvise. Well I think there is no area which is as improvised as the election of a Secretary-General. There's very little on which to go. So we didn't even know things like how does a person become a candidate; a candidate must necessarily be nominated by a member of the Council, by a member of the United Nations, by a non-governmental organization, or by an individual or by the candidate himself, submitting his name? All those were unknown. I remember for example one day a discussion about how Waldheim had become a candidate. The Austrian government as far as I recall had not submitted anything formal to the President of the Security Council, nor had anybody else. There had been some press declarations I think by the Austrian Foreign Minister. But everybody knew that Waldheim was a candidate. But there was no formal piece of paper by which you could say, well, he became a candidate by this route and on this date, by this submission. So anyhow, we met on this

particular date and we agreed that at that particular time, we agreed to recognize that there were two candidates - Waldheim and Salim. In the case of Salim there were more formal procedures. I think the chairman of the African Group had submitted a paper, and a few others had signed as well. But the issue of how a person becomes a candidate arose again because after Waldheim and Salim left, well withdrew, not really withdrew, rather stepped aside you could say, temporarily, there was a new field of candidates and the same issue arose. And there again in the end, the Council simply agreed, sort of recognized everybody who seemed to be a candidate, who was talking and canvassing or who had mentioned to the President that he wanted to be considered.

JS So you just made up a list, so to speak, out of the air?

OT Well you could say so because there was no strict procedure, so you find among the people whose names are on the list are those whose names were submitted by somebody from the Council, by a government outside the Council, others whose names appeared somehow on the scene, precisely how nobody knows but everybody recognizes that they were candidates.

JS In a situation like this, who are then the major actors, who can have the greatest influence in determining the candidature of one or another particular individual?

OT Whether a person becomes a candidate or not I think depends in the first instance on the President of the Council who can bring to the attention of Council any names on which he has

stumbled. He can say, "look, I've received the following names." I never heard anybody ask him, "how did you receive the names?", you see. And too, it depends on what the Council wants to take notice of, and the Council must, in accordance with its procedure - if the President says, "look as far I know the following names A, B and Z. Anyone on the Council can put up his hand and say, "well there are others we haven't mentioned. I've heard of X, Y, Z." And the council agrees that all those - that everybody - on that list should be considered a candidate, well then they become candidates. So it depends on the President and the Council members which, then, may have the unfortunate effect that what works in one season may not work in another season depending on who are members and who's President. Some may interpret it very broadly, others more narrowly. There is no precision about this. And as far as I know, though, there has never been a dispute about anybody being excluded. Certainly not during the '81 elections, and I have not heard of it before or after, that anybody who wished to be a candidate on some grounds was excluded from being a candidate. For example, I remember a case of Salas who was then head of UNFPA, and he was a candidate who was very interested. His own government was very opposed to him being a candidate. We considered him.

JS That's precisely the question I wanted to ask, the role of governments. You would consider somebody, that is the Council would, who did not have the endorsement of his government?

OT We did in the case of Salas. And I'm trying to think of another case. We did so in the case of Sadruddin Aga Khan whose government was difficult to determine, you see. I think that in the end it was Jordan, a member of the Council, submitted his name but it wasn't a member from what could be called his government, you see. And nobody raised an issue about that. I am trying to think if another example may be - well, another example may come to mind.

JS Would the Council go so far as to question a government as to its attitude on a particular person if he was a national of that country?

OT Not during the '81 elections. I don't know if in the past this was done or in the future, but certainly not in '81 - no, because we would have done so with Salas. All the names were received and we simply proceeded to consider the names and nobody went beyond receiving the names to inquire what the attitudes of the governments were.

JS Now, how is lobbying effected? Obviously there are some people who want the job, we can take Mr. Waldheim as a case.

OT In '81 all the candidates wanted the job, all of them, beginning with the two, Waldheim and Salim, but also all subsequent candidates. And they all had various methods of lobbying. I mean, the most organized and most formal and most thorough was Salim's. That began at the level of the OAU, and the formal approval of the OAU then gathered support from other regional caucuses, like the Arab League, the Group of

77, non-aligned movement, and I think the Islamic Conference, a
ll of whom added their support to that of the OAU. So he came
to his candidature with a whole bandwagon rolling ahead of
him. Then the formal submission of the name was done by the
OAU chairman that month. In the case of Waldheim he did a lot
of canvassing but most of it was informal, if you like. You
know, he spoke to various ministers, to some heads of state,
to some ambassadors and so on, seeking their support,
pigeonholing them here and there. But he too did a lot of
canvassing, tremendous canvassing. So the two who were the
main protagonists for a long time, they did a lot of
canvassing, they were aggressive, both of them. One very
formal, the other one not so formal but no less aggressive.

JS So to a certain extent, the lobbying was not necessarily
centered at the United Nations but can take place in capitals.

OT It was at all levels. It's done in capitals, it's done at the
United Nations, at both places. I would say in all the forums
where decision-makers crisscross each other. In other words,
a whisper here, and support is sought there, I mean in the
case of Salim the Tanzanian government was very deeply
involved. I think they sent a delegation to all the key
countries of the world, formally seeking support, beginning
with the Permanent Members, and then all the members of the
Council, and then other leading countries of the world. But
you know it has to be mentioned about the character of that
particular election that the first phase of it, which was the

longest phase, was highly polarized. You had two chiefs, two generals, each with his army behind him. You had two camps, sharply polarized; it was a very polarized affair. I mean, first there was Waldheim and Salim, and then their supporters - the African group, the Group of 77, the non-aligned movement, or some of those who were blocking Salim or who were blocking Waldheim - it was a very polarized atmosphere. It was a very open contest. I don't think the United Nations had ever had anything quite as open as that, an open contest. You know, with the press, it was a very open contest.

JS Now, in the discussions which took place among the Security Council members then, and also later when there were different and more candidates, how did the discussions go? I mean, was there any discussion of the qualifications of the particular candidate as opposed to those of the other candidate?

OT I must confess there was not. What was provided, and I know in the case of Waldheim and Salim they were both known, they were known quantities, both. They knew that Waldheim was seeking to be the Secretary-General; Salim was at the United Nations; but in the case of the second bath of candidates, I think 6 or maybe 8 candidates of varying backgrounds, I remember receiving an official CV from each of the candidates and circulating that to all members of the Council. So that meant that they had in front of them all the facts, you know, somebody's background, all the facts about them. I suppose they were given to each mission and maybe there wa some

bilateral discussion. But as a group, discussing, or saying "let's look at all the candidates and what are their relative strengths, weaknesses and qualifications, no, that didn't happen.

JS And how did the candidature of Perez de Cuellar come into play at the second stage?

OT Well, his [candidature] was among that second batch of candidates. You know, there was himself, Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan; there was the fellow from Panama, Ilueca, who was a Foreign Minister and then Vice President. There were the two Ramphals at that time - there was the Ramphul from Mauritius, then there was Sonny Ramphal from the Commonwealth; then there was somebody I think from Colombia whose name slips my mind. Who else was there? Salas, I think there were 8 candidates altogether. And their names arrived variously, you know. In the case of Perez de Cuellar, there was a fellow called Pastore, Señor Pastore who was a leader of the Peruvian delegation to the General Assembly that particular year. Very striking-looking Latin gentlemen, you know, very courtly and patrician. I think he was the brother-in-law of the President - a very likable person, a very nice man. So he was the one who did most of the canvassing for Perez de Cuellar. He met the various members of the Security Council, told them who Perez de Cuellar was and about his candidature before Salim and Waldheim withdrew. It was important that all the canvassing on behalf of the second batch of the candidates

began well before, although all of them prefaced their discussion by saying, "look, in case, you know, if things work out between these two, of course no problem," especially those who were in the Third World and didn't want to appear to be undermining Salim's candidature. So those from Latin American, Asian, and so on all said, "look, we are just sort of alerting you only in case things don't work out." At the time that Salim and Waldheim stepped aside, we had a reasonable idea of who else, of what dark horses were waiting in the wings. And they immediately signaled their candidature. Now, the candidature of Perez de Cuellar, I believe, was submitted by his government but I don't recall too precisely now. Certainly, this Pastore, Ambassador Pastore, was very active on his behalf.

JS Now, when you became President of the Security Council the subject had reached a rather advanced stage, but if I recall correctly, there was still no clarity at all as to who would be the winning candidate. I want to ask, how did you handle it as President?

OT Well the issue had been blocked, you know, for whatever the number of weeks we were going through the formal voting. The votes received by Salim and Waldheim fluctuated, from one balloting session to another. Sometimes one would have the final majority, sometimes he would fall below, but what remained consistent throughout was that each was blocked by a Permanent Member, by a veto, each was being vetoed by a

Permanent Member. Officially nobody knows who, although in the case of Waldheim, the Chinese did own up and they would explain why. In the case of Salim nobody really owned up although most people suspected that the United States was the one who blocked Salim but I don't recall the United States officially owning up to this. So anyhow I came to the Presidency when there was a certain sense of despondency, people had generally given up and you know, didn't know what to do. The balloting had gone on for weeks. I think we'd had 16 or 18 inconclusive ballots, with no prospect of a breakthrough. So I had to sort of think through what we'd do next, we didn't have much time because the General Assembly would be rising within I think a week and a half (or something like that) the 13th (or the 15th I think) was due to rise. So anyhow I thought the best thing to do was, first, talk to the members of the Council informally, to spend a lot of time just informally discussing with the Members before doing anything formal. So I discussed at length with them, trying to really gauge their true attitudes. And for this purpose I concentrated on the five [Permanent Members], and among the five, I especially concentrated my attention on China and the United States because I knew China was the one blocking Waldheim and I suspected the United States was the one blocking Salim. So in the end I had a discussion with the Chinese ambassador and I just put to him, "look, I have a theoretical scenario," you know to find out a sense of was

there a likely change of attitude, and the impression I got was that there was not likely to be a change of attitude.

JS On both candidates?

OT Yes, it was not discussed on those terms; it was very long-winded and very elaborate - all kinds of things; but the end result was for me to gauge: is there a situation, is there a permutation in this scenario in which the Chinese might consider changing their attitude? The impression I got was not. Then I had a long discussion with Jeane Kirkpatrick, the United States Ambassador, and we discussed many things - from the periphery, coming into the center and so forth, again my idea was to get from her whether there was a likelihood that the United States position would change because both candidates believed that given more time, the particular power blocking them would have a change of mind. I wanted to be sure if this was the case - if it was the case I wanted to give them a full opportunity. If it was not, on the other hand, not to block things further. So these two discussions were the most crucial. At the end of each I got a clear impression - don't ask me precisely how - but I got a clear impression that it was unlikely the United States view would change and it was also unlikely the Chinese view would change. So my next step then was to work on the two candidates; to try to convey this message to them, to let them know I would be completely impartial, that even though I supported Salim (my delegation supported Salim from the beginning to end - at one

stage, indeed, I was called the campaign manager for Salim), but as President that was not my role, without in any way changing my support for Salim. So anyhow I had a long discussion with both Salim and Waldheim separately, conveying to them the fact that for the time being, I saw nothing to be gained by them or by anybody else by continuing this process, and that my impression was that it would be best to persuade them to step aside. I was very careful to emphasize that I was not asking them to withdraw - I was simply asking them to give a chance to test another scenario; because if they were right, one or other of the blocking powers would relinquish the veto, and then the next stage would be blocked anyway and would come back to them. So they had nothing to lose if they were right. If, of course, they were wrong, then it would be proved the next day as well by the powers allowing somebody else to go through. So it was very difficult, psychologically for the two. It was very difficult for them both because they both believed, Salim to a lesser extent, but Waldheim very seriously But in the end they accepted my proposition to step aside temporarily. So I think I said, "look, give us a few days, a week at most. You remain candidates, you remain on the list, except if we should come to a voting we shall not vote on the two of you. But you remain candidates, we shall vote on new people. And if that takes us nowhere we will come back to you. The whole scenario then was to alternate. They would remain in a special

category, the two of them, and then the rest. So if we tried the rest and nothing was working, we would come back to the two of them. So the real breakthrough came when the two of them separately finally agreed to step aside. Then the whole question of how you announced this, the way in which it wouldn't look like after ten years one was withdrawing and one was stepping down in favor of another, all this had to be worked out. But in the end they both agreed to step aside and then with that I made an announcement inviting new candidates, and they then came. And they began open canvassing, earlier they were canvassing openly enough but maybe not declaring their candidacies at the top of their voices. Now they were able to do that. So they did their canvassing.

Now the next stage for me was, I didn't want us then to repeat - well, it wasn't a mistake - but to repeat the experience we had with Salim and Waldheim. I thought it wasn't good for the Council and for the United Nations to have this public-session voting repeatedly which was confusing. So I said, "very well, I want a system by which we can test the viability of these candidates." What I then proposed was, I organized what one might call straw ballots. These were sheafs of paper in blue. I asked all of the Permanent Members and their deputies - no interpreters, no delegations, just the two of them - to meet in the consultation room. I explained to them what we were about to do, that I wanted to test the viability, they were informed that what I was testing had no

meaning, only a very vague test. And they were good enough to agree to cooperate. So then I gave, first a piece of paper just to the Permanent Members, the United Nations blue, and I said, "look, for you, here's a list of candidates. All I want you to do is to tell me which of these candidates you would discourage - that's all." Nothing more than that. So if for whatever reason you say, "I really should think twice," or "maybe," but if you are lukewarm on this candidate, just indicate your discouragement, which is a much lower level of indication than knocking anybody out." And the idea there was to see the potential of avoiding attracting a veto for a candidate. Then the second piece of paper I gave to all the members of the Council, to all of the 15. I asked them, "which of these members, or these candidates, would you encourage?" And the idea there was to see the vote gathering capacity of each candidate so we could have an idea if there was anybody who seemed to have the capacity to get the vote near the required majority, and at the same time, seem probably able to avoid a veto. The results were very interesting because of the many candidates listed, I think there were about 3 candidates who clearly had the potential to get the required majority. At the top of the list I believe was Sadruddin Aga Khan. I don't remember precisely the number of "encouragements" he got, but I know it was clearly above the required majority. Perez de Ceullar I think was number two or number three. He didn't do badly but if the

"encouragement" was translated into votes he would have been below the required majority. But it was a credible show, and then I think Ilueca and one or two others made a credible show. Then there were others who were basically sort of within four, five "encouragements," and credible to me was six and upwards. Then from the five, various "discouragement" flashed across - Ramphal had a "discouragement," Sadruddin had a "discouragement." Maybe two, I don't remember now. But of the credible candidates, of the three who seemed to be doing not badly, the one who had no "discouragements," was Perez de Cuellar.

And that essentially really was the purpose of the exercise. I wanted to gauge that and then tell that to the Council, saying, "look, this is where we are." That way the Council could immediately then see if, for example, Perez de Cuellar was a fluke, somebody would say "oh my goodness, we have to do something to block him, we didn't mean to give the signal that he could actually go unblocked." Or if some people felt so and so he was getting a very low vote but they didn't really mind him, they might say, "well, we have no strong feelings about him, we'll rally behind him." And there would be a kind of interaction, it would give some room for play. So I then called the Council, and told them, "look the result of what we have done so far is as follows in terms of discouragement and encouragement. And obviously the question then was "what do you want us to do? We could reflect on

this, and then discuss it again; or if you feel that we are ready to no go and test our work up to now in a formal session, we can do so. It's entirely up to you." Now that again was sort of an attempt to see how members speak, to tell you where they stood. So immediately, I think Spain spoke very strongly saying, "look, we should proceed to a formal session." A signal, an interesting signal; the United States had no difficulty with a formal session; I think France had no difficulty with a formal session, the British, the Russians would go with what had been said. So it was sort of clear that in terms of the Permanent Members they seemed to have no difficulty with Perez de Cuellar because, as things stood, he was the one who had that potential. So I said, "very well, let's go and test this." And then I had a sense, because I always felt that he was the key person who avoided You see, I felt that those who feel strongest are obviously the five Permanent Members, and removing a discouragement is difficult because a discouragement, I felt, translates into a veto. But encouragement is fluid, there are many members there who don't feel so strongly; they may have their candidate. For example, we supported Sonny Ramphal from Uganda that is, in the second round of candidates, but we're not against Perez de Cuellar, or any number of other candidates. We simply felt we know him better and he was sort of dynamic, etc. etc. but we would have no difficulty in supporting somebody else who was a perfectly decent fellow.

So anyhow we then went to a formal session, and before we did, I was certain that in the formal session Perez de Cuellar would pull through, I was certain about that. He was quite below in terms of those encouraging him but I knew that his potential to avoid a veto would turn into a rally, in fact. So we went into formal session. Sadruddin still got the required majority, but he had a veto. Others who had done well in terms of encouragement dropped a little bit in favor of Perez de Cuellar. Perez de Cuellar's positive votes went up more than he had got in the encouragements, so he jumped over the required majority. And of course on the negative side, he still had a blank. So we had one ballot and he was nominated. What remained now was to announce this, and that was done.

JS So in this case certainly the President of the Security Council had a very direct influence on the outcome.

OT Yes, such as I have described, yes. But I think that was because people were in a quandary, and part of the problem I think within the United Nation's setup, within the United Nations diplomacy, is when something is a very controversial issue, people are shy to take initiatives, very shy. And the contest between Waldheim and Salim had become very polarized and very controversial. I think people generally were not willing to go to Waldheim or to Salim, make suggestions, explore possibilities. And then also when you are dealing with Permanent Members, people again are afraid to go and say,

"look, you big fellows, this is the idea I have and I hope it meets with your cooperation" in case they don't like it, in case they don't understand it. People are shy, unless the idea comes from them first and then they simply put it forward. So, in the circumstances, well I felt it was important to try something and in the event everybody cooperated and it worked.

JS It was somewhat chancy though as to which candidate in fact was going to come out of this formula.

OT No question about that. It was not something clear from the beginning, no. Not in the beginning with Waldheim and Salim, nor in the second round. In fact I can say that really, at that stage, our only concern was to produce a Secretary-General, that is the truth of the matter, and hopefully to produce one who was also good. In any event, we were lucky on both counts.

JS But it might not always be that way and I was wondering, really a final question, taking your experience into account, what advice would you have - well I suppose two questions. First, would you have any particular advice to go to your successor - that is the President, the man who will be President of the Security Council next November or December? And secondly, have you reached any conclusions in terms of a better procedure based on your experience in selecting one of the most important figures in international life?

OT Well, in terms of advice to whoever will preside over this

whenever, I can't. Basically, one, because the Council is so well endowed anyway and I think each Council has its own dynamic and the situation will sort of tell you what has to be done. There are so many gifted people there. I would only say that they have to be, they should simply be flexible, be open, that's all.

JS Let me just interrupt to ask one question. There is the rather elaborate repertory or repertoire of Council procedures that is maintained as far as I know, and I want to ask your confirmation of this, it does not cover the election of the Secretary-General.

OT Yes, that's right.

JS So there is not, while as you say the Council is well endowed, there is not a history, a written history, that they can look at.

OT No. They can look at certain precedents; what happened when, but even that is not a binding thing. That's why I say, just be very open-minded, very flexible. The key thing is to adopt a procedure which would produce the best person.

JS And is there a better procedure? Mr. Urquhart, as you know, Sir Brian Urquhart, has suggested in a recent study the establishment of some kind of a search committee which would begin working early and looking into the qualifications of various world leaders.

OT Well, I read the Brian Urquhart and Childers' report - an excellent report, some very good ideas there on what needs to

be done. So we won't go into details on that. I would simply say that to me the key to this is pragmatic flexibility. There should be maximum consultation, there should be more serious, more concerted, some of it at various levels as suggested by Brian Urquhart and Childers within the Council itself, and also outside the Council, with distinguished statesmen who may not be part of the United Nations System. There should be broader consultation, and the Council should perhaps proceed about the task more systematically. They might say, "look, we give ourselves so many weeks in which to receive all the candidates and thereafter we begin discussing them. Thereafter we will begin balloting, or something like that. It's difficult, I can't say that this should be the procedure.

JS You're suggesting though that the process - as flexible as it may be - should begin fairly early.

OT The earlier the better. Not too early but I think at the beginning of the General Assembly, you know, or even earlier. Just so you don't have the kind of panic that characterized '81.

JS Is there any other point that you would like to put on the record in connection with the '81 election? Or that you feel should be recorded?

OT I'm sure there are many points, I can't think which though

JS Well there was a very lucid explanation. I want to thank you

very much.

OT Well, thank you.



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