

Natal Midlands Black Sash

JOY ROBERTS interviewed by Mary Kleinenberg
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Interview for the records of the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu Natal.

Joy: There is nothing very significant about me. I was born in Durban, lived in Durban, went to school and university in Durban. At university I did a Social Science degree, making me a Social Worker, and then an honours in Psychology. Very soon thereafter, in 1948, I was married to Peter Hey, and we travelled extensively. We had two years in Cambridge, a year in London, a year in America, and we returned to Maritzburg in 1954. That was just prior to Black Sash starting. We were very aware when we returned, both of us, of the appalling discrimination and it was such a contrast to the years we'd had away so it was a big factor. We were very aware of the injustices and all that. It was in 1954, I think it was Strydom, who disenfranchised the coloured voters and it was thereafter that the Sash was formed.

I don't remember when I actually joined Sash because I was involved with other things. My first son, Jonathan, was born in 1955, and my daughter Jean was born at the end of 1956. In all that time after we had come back Peter was at the University of Natal in the Dept of Education and very much involved in theatre as well as education, and life was full of university and theatre. In about 1957 we spent a lot of time at Polela at the health centre because Peter was writing a doctorate studying education in a changing society. We were part of the health centre there which was a wonderful health centre until the government closed it down.

Mary: Where is Polela?

Joy: Polela is near Bulwer, out in the country.

We still travelled a lot and at Polela we met Kate Ndlovu who was Peter's translator and secretary, and Kate was our friend. She used to come to Maritzburg and spend time with us. Peter was not well so in 1956 we went to London for his health reasons, and again we went to London in 1958 when Peter had a Nuffield Fellowship and we took Kate with us. It was an exciting thing for Kate, but quite strange because she had to get permission from her husband before she was allowed to travel and it was quite a performance in getting her passport. We went by ship and my two children were still small and the idea was that Kate was going to help us look after them, but really it was to just to be with us and give her the experience. It was wonderful, and she was with us for a whole year in London. We came back at the end of 1958 and returned to Maritzburg in 1959.

But during all of that time since the first time we had got back to Maritzburg we had, both of us, become involved in various things. I had gone to the local Maritzburg Child Welfare to ask if there was anything I could do but there didn't seem to be a place where I could fit in. I had made a great friend of Bunty Biggs and Bunty was very involved in what was then called The Edendale Welfare Society. The Edendale Welfare Society, at that stage, was divided into four sections, there were two pre-primary schools, an

old people's home and a child welfare society. Bunty looked after child welfare and she pulled me in, and from that I also got involved in Sash so I can't put a special date to it but it was somewhere around there. In 1960 we were back properly in Natal, Peter was at the University and I got involved in Edendale Welfare Society and in Sash. Friends were friends of both actually, we were all involved together.

In 1962 Peter and I, and the children, went to New Zealand for a year and we came back in January 1963 and we produced a big production of Julius Caesar in July. In October 1963 Peter died; he had been battling with ill health but had a grim determination to go on. He had always been involved in theatre but he also would not be involved in any theatre production that would perform to discriminated audiences. Anybody who had the price of a ticket had to be able to come which confined all our work to university halls or non-white halls like the Lotus Theatre.

So for a few years the children and I were on our own and I was very involved in Sash at the time and in Edendale, and in 1967 I became Chairman of the Edendale Society and stayed there for 30 years.

Joy: I have been ignoring your list of questions.

Mary: That's absolutely fine.

Joy: You ask if I can remember some of the people in key positions in the Natal Midlands Black Sash. Yes, I can remember people. There was Marie Dyer, and Bunty Biggs, and Phoebe Brown, and Mamie Corrigal, of course, very much there, Pessa Weinberg, Jennie McKenzie, Meg Strauss, all good friends.

I was involved, as I've said, in Edendale and I used to have arguments with particularly Mamie who thought it was wrong to do the government's business for them: you shouldn't be involved in welfare. Just let them sink, she said, that's the state's responsibility, you are doing their job for them. Well, that was hard, because you couldn't turn your back on them. I couldn't, anyway. But, you could do battle in small ways – things like grants which, at that stage, were very much geared to white grants being higher than Indian grants, and "coloured" grants, and black grants were very small. So, you could put in your word of protest there.

Mary: Can I interrupt? Did Mamie disapprove of the Advice Office work on the same grounds?

Joy: Not that I know of. It was never a very serious debate you know, she would just give me a nudge, we didn't really pursue it.

Then, if I go down your list it says "Did you ever work in the Advice Office?" No I did not, so I can't comment on the work of the Advice Office.

Joy: "What was Black Sash doing when you joined?" It was protesting against unjust legislation, it was holding vigils, we called them vigils rather than demonstrations, and also public meetings which were advertised, and we would have guest speakers. The three-pronged thing was really to protest against unjust legislation, to inform the public about the results of that legislation, and then we also tried to build bridges. To be honest this didn't work all that well. We'd have small tea parties where black and

Indian friends were invited but that's always quite a difficult thing. I don't know that this had any sort of significant effect.

Mary: Except that other people weren't doing this.

Joy: Of course, no non-white person could be part of the Sash.

Mary: Up until when?

Joy: This was right from the beginning and the reasoning was you had to be a voter to be part of Sash; only voters could have a significant voice so that's why they limited it to voters. That was the reason as I understood it. I can't put a date to when that was relaxed, but it was way down the line.

Mary: I was under the impression that membership was open to all women, so I am quite wrong. {Not part of the interview but, Black Sash membership was open to women voters until 1963 when all women over the age of 18, and permanently resident in South Africa were eligible for membership}

Joy: For many years it was only voters because they would have a more significant influence than just a wide open demonstration.

We stood outside the City Hall whenever a government minister was arriving just to try and make a point. I think the public meetings were very good although I can't say they were achievements in that we attained any particular goal, but they certainly publicised the effects of the legislation that was coming through, and made people aware. I personally was never harassed. You know, the Special Branch were always around, they were wandering about, taking photographs and doing these odd sort of things. Sometimes members of the public would say stupid things like, why don't you go home, but I wouldn't call it harassment.

You ask if I took part in protest stands. Yes, I took part in protest stands whenever I could and I thought they were a wonderful demonstration of solidarity. We were there, we were together, we were all having the same reaction to the things that were popping up. They were important, they were evidence of a sort of attitude that wasn't the accepted one of the time. We were all friends and we were very disciplined, we stood in a line at the corner opposite the city hall (what used to be the gardens where the cannon was). We would line up in two columns with our placards and our sashes and when the clock struck we would walk out and move to left and to right to take up our positions and stand there without moving, if possible, until the half hour struck and then we turned around and walked away.

Mary: No talking, just a dignified silence.

Joy: Absolutely silent and you didn't respond to anybody who insulted you or said anything. You just stood there making your point, your posters were there, saying what you had to say.

It asks here how the Natal Midlands branch related to other branches? I think it related very well. For years- I can't remember how many years- I was secretary of the Natal Midlands Black Sash and I had a very strong link with someone called Bobby Johnson who was the National secretary and they would

send notices and I'd send them around to our members, and you sort of felt as if you knew them. We also went to conferences and Jean Sinclair was always President in my time. I remember, in 1967 I was re-married to Simon Roberts, and very soon afterwards I abandoned him with the two children so that I could go to a Cape Town conference, so I remember that Cape conference. But there were others, I can't remember how often they were held but I also remember one in Johannesburg. You got to know other people in other branches and it was a very friendly, warm atmosphere; there were no conflicts that I could ever detect. People stood up and had their say and made suggestions and sometimes the press came along to ask what you thought about things. There were always very good spokesmen around to do the talking.

"Was this region involved in the writing of the You and... booklets?" No, not to my knowledge but I don't recall that. Mind you I am 84 this week, so my mind might have slipped, you never know.

Joy: I don't think we were different in the Natal Midlands from anywhere else. We were limited by our own facilities and what was around, we followed a pattern and I take it that other centres did similar things.

"What other organizations did you work with?" I worked mainly with the Edendale Welfare Society, but changed its name to the Edendale Society for Family and Child Welfare so that it could be affiliated to the National Council for Child Welfare. For me it was almost a full-time job. I was told when I first joined that it would take a morning a week, but we didn't have all the electronic communications that we have now. I was also involved in the Liberal Party, of course, and we would have gatherings at our home. I am talking of Simon Roberts who I was now with and we would have a braai or a Liberal Party function. We had a big house and big grounds so it was easy. And then there was Race Relations, and there was the Liberal Democratic Association which had grown out of the Liberal Party, and later the Five Freedoms Forum.

Mary: That was started by Peter Brown I think?

Joy: Oh yes, we had meetings, but it didn't involve a lot, just like-minded people getting together.

Mary: I would like to ask how did you feel about the closure of the membership organisation?

Joy: Do you mean when it changed from the Black Sash to the Trust? Well that's quite a difficult one because, of course, in those apartheid years the tyrants were easily distinguishable, you knew, you always knew what you were against, and you knew the risks involved and you had a very strong driving force to make you partake of whatever was going on in that atmosphere. In the 1990s those targets got diffused, I suppose, and I don't think I had any strong feelings about the change except that I always felt that if the Sash name was involved it was really a sort of morality; but it's not morality, it's a sort of idealistic thing, not political. It was never political, in that it supported one particular party although most of us did, but Sash itself was non-political. I suppose I felt that there wasn't the same urgency to be involved and also I was involved in a lot of other things. I didn't feel strongly, plus or minus. It was just that our targets had shifted and I felt, and still feel, that injustices should be challenged wherever they are.

Mary: What else? Oh, perhaps that question 15, looking back from a distance how do you feel about your involvement in the Sash?

Joy: Looking back I would say I was proud to be a member of Sash; it provided a platform, a voice about things that I thought were important. I used to feel slightly irritated when people said, "I'd like to join this Black Sash, but you know my husband wouldn't let me", and I would think, what's wrong with you? So I was always proud to be part of it, and looking back I think it was a wonderful, remarkable organization to pull people together and express a protest against injustice that was simply so blatantly terrible. So that's about that.

Mary: I did ask what your relationship with other members of Sash was and did this alter your outlook, and you have already said that you were all great friends.

Joy: Yes, we were all friends, and you know, because Edendale Welfare was working in a black area a lot of the Sash people were also involved there. I think of Meg Strauss. We all had similar attitudes, we were friends and I felt as though I knew them well. I still do, those of us who are left, anyway.

Mary: Maybe you could say something about whether you gained anything from the Sash, and what do you think that was?

Joy: I suppose I gained what I have already said, a sort of sheen of solidarity with people who thought as you did, a sort of web or support which held you up. It's difficult to say if there is any specific gain I would have, except, as I say, I was very glad to be part of it.

Mary: Do you want to say anything else?

Joy: I don't think so.

Mary: Thank you very much, Joy, especially since you are not feeling very well. Thank you.

Black Sash Membership

In the October/November 1963 issue the Sash magazine reports:

"The Black Sash opens its ranks

The real business of the Conference began on Wednesday, with the debate on Border's resolution that the Black Sash should open its ranks to all women of the Republic of South Africa who subscribe to the aims and objectives of the organization. This matter has been debated for four years in succession, and was brought forward last year by Border Region as a firm resolution, but it did not gain the two-thirds majority required for any resolution affecting membership.

As in previous years, this discussion produced a high standard of debate, although little was added to what had been said at previous conferences. It was obvious that there were still many members who felt that the strength of the Black Sash lay in the fact that it was an organization of voters with a strong sense of personal responsibility, pledged to protest against wrongs brought about by voters; and for some time it appeared that the ranks would not be opened.

However, during discussion on an allied resolution, it became apparent that the enfranchisement of the women of the Transkei posed a serious problem. To admit these new "voters", to whom a form of franchise has been granted, and no other non-White women would be to condone apartheid, Bantustans, etc., and exclude women who are powerless to obtain the vote because of Government policy. These considerations had a decisive effect on the final voting on Border's resolution, and it was passé with a comfortable majority."