

Natal Midlands Black Sash

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

I am Phoebe Brown. I can't remember when I joined the Black Sash, or when the Black Sash started. I suppose you can say I came from a privileged background. I was married to Peter Brown who, for his whole life, ever since he was a child, wanted to do something about apartheid and that's how he lived his life because he thought apartheid was the most terrible thing, which it was. That's all I can say about myself, I did my best to support him, right till he died.

Mary: Thank you Phoebe. Now, can you remember some of the people that you worked with in the Black Sash?

Phoebe: Yes, well, Marie Dyer, who was also a friend of ours; Mamie Corrigan, also a very great friend; Sally Lundie and Ruth Lundie, both good friends; and Meg Stauss, also a friend. And, Iris Friday who was the treasurer. Then I took over, very reluctantly, from her because she felt it was time she gave up, and I did that for eight years, under her guidance. In any case, we were great friends of hers and Heather Morkell. In Cape Town there was Eulalie Stott was also a friend we saw whenever we went to Cape Town, and she came to us. Jean Sinclair was always there and always friendly, and I can't remember the names of the other people.

Mary: Well that's quite a good lot. Did you ever work in the Advice Office?

Phoebe: No

Mary: Well, then you can't tell us how you think it has changed. Perhaps you would like to tell us what the Black Sash was doing when you joined?

Phoebe: I can't remember exactly what the Black Sash was doing when I joined. I just knew that we were always going to meetings, and we were having stands, but I can't remember what year that was. Every piece of legislation that was passed in those days was moving us all away from what we believed in, so we were quite happy to stand up against it. We went on some marches, and once we were carrying banners, and torches, and the police started getting unruly with us, and I remember hitting one of them, very hard, on this march, and Heather Morkell, who was behind me never forgot it, and said I must have something very violent in me.

Mary: What did you hit him with?

Phoebe: With the torch, a burning torch. We walked from the University to the City Hall.

Mary: Pessa (Weinberg), and Fleur Webb have talked about that march with the burning torches, so it obviously was very memorable.

Phoebe: Yes, it was. Well you know when you are attacked, as we were, by the police, not madly attacked with guns or anything, but they tried to break the march up, and failed, and it was scary.

Mary: Talking about the police, were you ever harassed by them? When Peter was banned it must have difficult for you to be a member of an organisation like the Black Sash. Did they single you out?

Phoebe: No, they didn't worry me, but we knew they were watching the house and seeing who came because people were not allowed to come to the house, unless they (the Security Police) knew who was coming and what was happening. So, our life was quite different for 10 years (while Peter was banned) to how we had lived before.

Mary: Could you go out quite freely?

Phoebe: Yes, I could go to the children's schools, and move around as freely as I liked but because Peter couldn't I, of course, didn't. If he went to the farm at Mooi River he had to have permission and be told on which day he could go, and which day he had to come back. He had to report, I can't remember if it was every day, to the police in Mooi River. So, yes, it did affect our lives.

Mary: It must have been very difficult for you, and for Peter. You were very much part of that banning. Phoebe, you talked about meeting Jean Sinclair and Eulalie Stott so I wondered if you did go to Black Sash meetings in other parts of the country?

Phoebe: I was once sent as a delegate to, I think it was Johannesburg, and I don't know what sort of a meeting it was but all the big names in the Black Sash were there, and they were all leaping to their feet and talking the whole time. I sat silent through the whole conference because I thought this really isn't for me to try and stand up and speak, so I never went again.

Mary: I must say the first time I went to a conference I was quite intimidated, and impressed by these very powerful women. My group was much later than yours and I never met Jean Sinclair, but her daughter, Sheena Duncan, was very admirable.

Phoebe: I was still there, with you. What was her name again?

Mary: Sheena Duncan was a very powerful presence but, when you got to know her she really was a very warm and supportive person.

Phoebe: We didn't get to know her that well, we knew Jean better.

Mary: Now, do you remember the region, when you were a member, writing any of the booklets – "You and.....", the small pocket books.

Phoebe: Yes, I remember the small books but I had nothing to do with them because Peter was not allowed to do anything about publishing, so we couldn't really keep things in our house

because we'd been searched originally, and they had taken things away, so we didn't get involved.

Mary: While you were a member of the Black Sash what other organisations did you work with?

Phoebe: We distributed milk at Edendale once a week to children and their mothers, and I can't really remember any political things.

Mary: The Liberal Party?

Phoebe: Yes, I was a member, but that closed down after not long. So, no, there weren't any other things really.

Mary: Who was distributing milk? Was that you and Peter, or was it part of an organisation?

Phoebe: It wasn't part of the Black Sash or any other organisation, but it did involve all of the people who worked in the Black Sash.

Mary: Was this because they were your friends?

Phoebe: Yes.

Mary: When the membership organisation closed down in 1995 how did you feel about it?

Phoebe: I don't know. Joy Roberts and I went to a Black Sash meeting, I don't remember what year it was, but it was quite a while after all the people that we knew were active in it. There was a whole new lot of younger people and we went to the meeting which was an important one, I have forgotten why, and Joy said, "I think this isn't the right meeting that we have come to". We waited a while and then discovered that it was the Black Sash meeting. After that she and I just opted out because we thought that we didn't know anyone anymore and their views were more radical than ours were, so I don't remember having any feelings.

Mary: I can understand that – things change.

Phoebe: Oh, completely.

Mary: Looking back how would you describe your involvement in the Black Sash? How did you feel about it? How do you feel about it?

Phoebe: Well, I was proud of having belonged to it, and I still am. I have always kept my Sash, not the badges because there weren't badges, just the Sash.

Mary: So you've still got it?

Phoebe: Yes.

Mary: It does leave one feeling quite proud of having stood up for something that was important. Now, one of the questions asks about your relationship with other members and you have already talked a bit about the fact that they are still your friends.

Phoebe: Yes, indeed they are. If they've got families we are still in contact with them, like the Corrighals, Maimie's four children.

Mary: Do you think you gained important things through working in the Sash?

Phoebe: I think so because there was a sense of togetherness about being against the system and what was going on. It certainly opened my eyes.

Mary: Phoebe, what about what you gave – you gained something but gave quite a lot.

Phoebe: I don't know, I mean anything I was asked to do, and could do, I did. I can't remember what exactly they were.

Mary: Did you take place in protest stands and were they always held opposite the City Hall.

Phoebe: Yes

Mary: Did you find that easy, or were you sometimes harassed by the Security Police?

Phoebe: No, we were never harassed and nobody seemed to take a great deal of interest in us. I passed the time watching people's feet. Well, if they had interesting feet I lifted my head to see who the person was.

Mary: I can't think of anything more to ask you, but can you think of anything you would like to say?

Phoebe: No, not really, except I think that that time was an important time, a part of history, and I am very glad that it is being recorded now and will go to the Alan Paton Centre.

Mary: I think it is important too, and with all these interviews we should have a nice balance.

Phoebe: Yes, because there are a lot of researchers who go there, and it is important that its there.

Mary: Thank you very much Phoebe for being part of the record.