

KWAZULU-NATAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW WITH HARRY GWALA, CONDUCTED BY
RUTH LUNDIE ON 10 MAY 1995.**

(‘G’ shall indicate the in Interviewee and ‘L’ the Interviewer.)

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- 8 L: This tape is of an interview with Mr Harry Gwala at his home in Dambuza Road, Edendale,
9 on the 10th of May 1995. The idea was to have a biographical run through, to be followed
10 by a second interview in a few days time. Mr Gwala’s frailty and tiredness are apparent on
11 the tape. Baba Gwala, you’re referred to by your friend, Makhathini, as ‘uBubesi’ and I knew
12 that in Mzala had written a biography of you.
- 13 G: Yes.
- 14 L: Is it in manuscript? It’s in Northern Natal, I’m told, the manuscript, or has it been published?
- 15 G: I don’t know what has happened to it.
- 16 L: Oh my. Well, I will try and follow that up, see - should I do that?
- 17 G: Please do.
- 18 L: Because it would be very good to get a hold on it..
- 19 G: Yes, Mzala, a very efficient, you know and? I would be very happy if this gets published.
- 20 L: I think that would be a very good idea. Now is his name Jabulani Nxumalo?
- 21 G: Yes.
- 22 L: Now I’ve got that right. We’ve got that right. Could you tell me, you told me that you were
23 born on the 31st of July, and in print it says the 1st of August?
- 24 G: Are you sure?
- 25 L: Just for the record.
- 26 G: It’s 30th..
- 27 L: ..of July?
- 28 G: Of July.
- 29 L: I knew that. Was your grandfather a Lutheran Minister, or is that a myth?

- 1 G: He was a deacon in the Lutheran Church.
- 2 L: Artwood? Beghli?
- 3 G: Yes.
- 4 L: And your family came from Ozwatheni? Am I right?
- 5 G: No.
- 6 L: Not?
- 7 G: Banji? It's in the area of Zwamani?
- 8 L: Yes, that I can remember. Baba Gwala you went to mission school at Empangeni and then
9 came to Edendale to the Reverend Arnold Nichols?
- 10 G: Yes, that's correct.
- 11 L: At the ? the matter of place and then down to boarding school where you met another old
12 friend of mine, Edgar Brookes...
- 13 G: Ja, at Adam's College, yes...
- 14 L: At Adam's College. And then after that you did your matric' in a private school and you
15 were a teacher at Slangspruit. You told me you went to classes in Longmarket Street..
- 16 G: Yes.
- 17 L: And that was really where you got your leftie ideas ? ..
- 18 G: That's correct.
- 19 L: And you joined the SACP?
- 20 G: Yes.
- 21 L: Did you go anywhere else for education on these grounds?
- 22 G: The Department organised my - I had been called they were termed 'Summer Schools.' They
23 were either in Cape Town, or in Johannesburg. I think one should realise there is this uneven
24 development in society. We didn't have competent even then ?. We have that in other places
25 like Edendale, Port Elizabeth, mostly in Johannesburg and Cape Town. So if you had
26 organised a school, we had the privilege to either go to Cape Town or to ?
- 27 L: In Johannesburg was where you met ?
- 28 G: No I didn't go to Cape Town...
- 29 L: ...and when, when you got back, in due course, you joined the Unions, the Commercial

- 1 Industry and Distributive?
- 2 G: That's right.
- 3 L: Because you remember that you became Secretary.
- 4 G: That's right, yes.
- 5 L: And you joined the ANC; the Youth League had started round about then - I would have
6 thought Ruth First had a great deal to do with starting that?
- 7 G: Ja, Ruth First, Walter Sisulu and some other young people were in fact instrumental in
8 forming the ANC's Youth League.
- 9 L: At this stage of the game, Dube, I think, had just pulled out...and you, present at a meeting
10 in Sobantu, at which Champion was present, and it ... would you ... have you energy to tell
11 me a little bit about that meeting?
- 12 G: Oh... Dube called our meeting before then, but Champion? was now charged with forming
13 the ANC and bringing it back in the fold? So the meeting held was during the Easter holidays,
14 it was held in the Methodist Church in Church Street, we had moved on to the hall in
15 Sobantu. And that meeting was chaired by Matt Matuba and other dignatories. It was a
16 stormy meeting. One of the stormiest meetings I have attended, in fact, he eventually retired.
17 There was a seizure about it! (He chuckles)
- 18 L: By whom? By whom?
- 19 G: By Champion.
- 20 L: Yes? Yes.
- 21 G: He was calm, he did not support the seat of power, but he was interested in seeing that the
22 ANC would do right and that we get back to being a national committee. So he remained
23 until everything was over.
- 24 L: Yes?
- 25 G: He was opted, it was the Champion Committee?
- 26 L: Yes... Round about that time the 'Anti-Pass Campaign' was going on - am I right?
- 27 G: There was a move..
- 28 L: ... It's 1944..
- 29 G: ... at that time ... there was a move to campaign on those pass laws, but the - the campaign

- 1 doesn't gain momentum until 1945 - during the - to its climax in 1946. Did I say '55?
- 2 L: You said '55.
- 3 G: No, no..
- 4 L: '45?
- 5 G: '45.
- 6 L: Yes, yes.
- 7 G: And in '46 it was at its height, yes.
- 8 L: Well, now the Youth League seem to have taken off round about 1948, here, in Natal.
- 9 G: That's correct, yes.
- 10 L: Did you - you were belonging to the ANC and the SACP then,...
- 11 G: That's right.
- 12 L: ...but you were working for the Unions in Durban?
- 13 G: Yes, in Pietermaritzburg.
- 14 L: Oh...
- 15 G: And I was also involved in these things?..
- 16 L: Yes?
- 17 G: Yes. It was organised by Percy Khumalo into these ? ..
- 18 L: Yes...Baba Gwala, at some stage you were Vice-President of the Natal ANC?
- 19 G: Youth League.
- 20 L: Youth League..
- 21 G: Yes.
- 22 L: And then, later I think, in the 1940s, you went to Howick..
- 23 G: That was 1950.
- 24 L: 1950?
- 25 G: Yes. It was 1950. It is when we were organising that first National stayaway with ?
- 26 throughout the country..
- 27 L: Throughout the country?
- 28 G: Yes.
- 29 L: You were listed as a Communist. Was it as early as 1950?

- 1 G: Yes, I was listed.
- 2 L: Because the Suppression of Communism Act went through two, three years after that..
- 3 G: No, it didn't...
- 4 L: Maybe it was...
- 5 G: It was somewhere about 1950..
- 6 L: Yes, yes.
- 7 G: And I think it was promulgated in 1951.
- 8 L: Ah..
- 9 G: Yes.
- 10 L: And then you were banned for two or three years - for operating - this is for Union activities?
- 11 G: Union activities, yes.
- 12 L: No, because of course the Black or Non-European Movement - as they were called - were
13 not in favour with the Government...
- 14 G: Yes, in fact when these bannings came about, they did not only affect Black Trade Unionists,
15 Black and White - were all victims....
- 16 L: Yes..
- 17 G: ... of this vicious law?
- 18 L: Yes, yes
- 19 G: Because most Trade Unionists were in the forefront, there were some members of the
20 Communist Party, they fell foul of this law. People like Izzy Woolfson, many other Whites
21 fell foul of it...
- 22 L: But the Unions carried on and then SACTU - round about 1955 - you were organiser for
23 SACTU?
- 24 G: Yes, it was in spite of ...
- 25 L: In spite of prohibitions?
- 26 G: ..of prohibitions...because I was prohibited?
- 27 L: Yes...
- 28 G: We always found loopholes and Timber Holding? had organised..
- 29 L: Yes, ...

- 1 G: Yes..
- 2 L: Of course, of course, and Scottish Cables all these places...
- 3 G: That's right, yes..
- 4 L: Yes, there was some ... wasn't there a tiff with Archie Gumede? About SACTU? Peter
- 5 Brown seems to think there was...
- 6 G: Archie Gumede was working for Mr Herschius Vaughne?, a lawyer, and he was Secretary of
- 7 the ANC then..
- 8 L: Yes..
- 9 G: But there was close cooperation between ANC and the Trade Unions.
- 10 L: Yes.
- 11 G: That is how we made contact with Archie, yes.
- 12 L: But then, Baba, coming round to 1960 and the State of Emergency, you were arrested.
- 13 G: Yes, I was arrested..
- 14 L: ... and detained....
- 15 G: ...detained..
- 16 L: ...briefly, I think?
- 17 G: Uh, well I was, I was arrested in the house.
- 18 L: Was this at Ockert's Kraal?
- 19 G: No, Longmarket Street...I was detained; once charged, and therefore I was a political type
- 20 prisoner and ...
- 21 L: Yes, I see...
- 22 G: When we stayed over ? there - I was detained, I was already inside. And do you remember
- 23 when I appeared in court - women became very excited because they said I was going to
- 24 come out. I warned them that I won't come out, in this situation. So that when I appeared
- 25 before the Magistrate and the charge was withdrawn, I was told I could go. They stood back
- 26 for me? As soon as I put the one foot outside the courtroom, I was snapped by the Police.
- 27 They said 'You are arrested under the State of Emergency.'" That was that.
- 28 L: Yes, it was, it was.. But then you were able to conduct a bit of activity - 1963. I had a chat
- 29 to John Makhathini...

- 1 G: Yes, I was.. In fact even during the State of Emergency we were conducting activities
2 underground, as it were. At that time Peter Brown was detained; I'm sure there were two
3 other Whites detained?
- 4 L: Yes, there was Hans Meidner
- 5 G: Yes..
- 6 L: ... and Derek Marsh.
- 7 G: Yes.
- 8 L: And he was detained by a mistake because the Security Police's records were out of date -
- 9 G: Yes..
- 10 L: ... he wasn't the Chairman, but they thought he was.
- 11 G: Oh yes, but Peter Brown was a tough guy - very tough, and one of those people who are very
12 conscious?
- 13 L: Yes, they kept on keeping up.
- 14 G: Yes, yes.
- 15 L: But then when they detained you in 1963, they held on to you...
- 16 G: They did...one old man, from Ladysmith - told us that that this was the beginning - Mr
17 Pienaar, he says - well he was a very interesting old man. He used to lecture us - he says
18 'Now you will get snake pit?' He says 'If there is a thief and one beast gets lost, it is you
19 surely that is going inside.' He says 'Here, if there is any problem anywhere you will be the
20 first to go inside.' So we won't escape it now - how true it was...
- 21 L: How true it was, how true it was. And there you stayed until 1972 -
- 22 G: Yes..
- 23 L: ...eight years I think?
- 24 G: No, I ... inside.. No, I was ...in and out, in and out...
- 25 L: '64...in and out, in and out, yes..
- 26 G: Yes.
- 27 L: But 60 - in 1964, there were four charges: recruiting for MK was one of the main...
- 28 G: That charge - that was when I was - I went in for a long span, 1964.
- 29 L: Did you take up the principalship of the Political Education College straight away?

- 1 G: I was in fact more or less the activist in Pietermaritzburg.
- 2 L: Yes.
- 3 G: Other people that were one, but I don't know what they were doing?
- 4 L: Yes. And it was eight long years before you were released.
- 5 G: It was eight long years before I was released. That was a '60, '66...
- 6 L: '72 you came out of there?
- 7 G: I can't much remember.
- 8 L: I can look that one up.
- 9 G: Yes.
- 10 L: But you ran the ? .
- 11 G: I decided to do something..and the only (thing) feasible at the time was ? provincial
12 occurrence...
- 13 L: Yes.
- 14 G: ...with some people couldn't change the ? . But I would have ? from the left? Fortunately,
15 maybe somebody had been affected by some people in Sweden who were helping the Church?
16 But what I hate with the Special Branch is that since you are arrested, whatever you do has
17 got a political motive around this concern? They didn't think that I was going to improve
18 because all the ? And it would have been a ? for I was using that in the political work? and
19 in fact ? it helped a lot of kids. But they also chipped into those people who were helping.
20 So much so that almost all of them - it went down to the ?
- 21 L: Was your little agency somewhere in the main Edendale Road?
- 22 G: No it was in town, the middle of town, at - in Commercial Road. During ? we once
23 collected/connected with Leon? in Pietermaritz Street. And then we collect in Gauteng? with
24 his wife, had been on tables, came to and passed away true ? I worked on the list, as a ?
- 25 L: And what did you say?
- 26 G: Then - well that old man from Britain is inviting me over to, over ? The I said shall I kill
27 him??? The Department deal with ? all because we didn't want to divulge all what we are
28 doing. They treated me very bad? But there was ? there was plenty of strife ? ..
- 29 L: Yes, there was a workers' strike, I think, in about '73, but you wouldn't have been able to

- 1 be involved in that?
- 2 G: I wasn't able to effect the strike started in Durban...but anything - they think you are behind
3 it...
- 4 L: Yes, yes. No that was their attitude. And then in '75 they detained you again..
- 5 G: Was it '75 or before that - anybody know - but they sent me this time off to jail again.
- 6 L: And they gave you this life sentence..
- 7 G: When they sentenced me ? in tears again...?
- 8 L: But, undeterred, you write a little manual, called 'Man and his country.'
- 9 G: Right, I did, yes.
- 10 L: ..which it still ?
- 11 G: Yes, and what I used to - donors and around lower for the layman, if I can understand, I said
12 to the law, there is something that was ? and functional. They had been given the evidence
13 were taken away in the ? night to the movements? ? in ? when we were involved with them
14 and those children still testified - which was pointed out to the ? there was nothing the matter
15 with it, and they said ? noise in press?
- 16 L: Well, the ? more ? the ? collapsed?
- 17 G: We were convicted on that evidence.
- 18 L: Yes, yes.. And then after a long time you were released in 1988..
- 19 G: I was released in 1970 - I thought...
- 20 L: Yes, yes ... but when you ultimately came out which was on the grounds of medical
21 treatment..
- 22 G: No, ...
- 23 L: No?
- 24 G: I came out because I had finished my sentence...
- 25 L: That eight year sentence..
- 26 G: But this one negotiated was after the '72 one.
- 27 L: Yes.
- 28 G: When I was released on medical grounds.
- 29 L: Yes, you were released on medical grounds and remember your debriefing at Colenso Hall.

- 1 G: That's right, yes.
- 2 L: And overseas you went, ...
- 3 G: We were surprised to now be allowed ? we are now faced with that illness, that ? We had a
4 wonderful night there - there were things terrible in prison, you would say?
- 5 L: Yes...
- 6 G: That things, things didn't go so well ? ?
- 7 L: The policeman or a doctor?
- 8 G: No, the doctor. I single him out because our doctors were terrible..
- 9 L: Really?
- 10 G: Terrible... you once the district surgeons - were very particular, about this medicines? ...
- 11 L: And he was a apparent to you?
- 12 G: Yes, whenever I was in prison, he'd dispute and show me that it was down to
13 Pietermaritzburg..
- 14 L: .. To Pietermaritzburg...
- 15 G: And he was finding ...
- 16 L: Oh so you were in 'Maritzburg for a bit before you were released?
- 17 G: Yes...
- 18 L: Yes, yes, and then - unfortunately - in England, the medical treatment wasn't as fulfilling as
19 we had thought ...
- 20 G: I think, I don't want to say that - what I wanted to say is that - that is another more advanced
21 far enough ? to be able to ? these sort of diseases and to ? Because I got - I was under a
22 Professor there - Professor Leigh, who was very interested in me. He wanted to come over
23 here to South Africa and finally I went to - there we got ? got the highest authority on this
24 disease, Mr ? Who was ? He was able too much ? except that then ?, he said I do not support
25 the Motor Neuron disease - it's motor neuron very much tremendous. I am simply suffering
26 from a disease that affects the spinal column..
- 27 L: I see.
- 28 G: It's similar to motor neuron disease, but it ? ...
- 29 L: But he was able, presumably, to see that you got the right treatment - that you were not

- 1 getting treatment for the wrong disease.
- 2 G: That's right. He said that there is either food poisoning or blood poisoning but he said it was
3 very close to what was suspected because of the conditions that we were having in?
- 4 L: Yes, yes. Nevertheless, on the way home, Baba Gwala, you were, I think in quite good fettle
5 after your first European trip because I hear you gave KK a roasting on the way home, then
6 you met the ANC in Lusaka...
- 7 G: Yes, yes...it..
- 8 L: That must have given you some satisfaction.
- 9 G: Yes it did? I had always felt moved in the sense that, in the sense, it was not just pleurisy,
10 there was no other tasks to perform, and we chose this path and we would pay a price for it?
- 11 L: Absolutely right, and when you came back and ? was the first to greet you.
- 12 G: Oh yes... he would have loved to come with ...he sent some people ? and he was ? and he was
13 ? hoping the sentence ? But then they couldn't arrest... yes (They chuckle)..
- 14 L: Well, the story continues, as you might say. You didn't liaise so closely with the SACP on
15 your return...
- 16 G: I didn't, I didn't... perhaps for obvious reasons, the SACP had by and large operated outside
17 the country, they never were inside the country, I would have inherited the constituency?
18 where there was injustice ? - that's the way I felt about it.
- 19 L: And you saw the need to affirm the ANC.
- 20 G: Yes.
- 21 L: Yes, yes. You know I think I've kept you quite long enough..
- 22 G: Oh, no...
- 23 L: ..on a day when you are feeling like a rest, so I'm going to...
- 24
- 25 End of this side of the tape.
- 26
- 27 There is nothing on the other side of the tape.