

KWAZULU-NATAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ANTON XABA, CONDUCTED BY RUTH LUNDIE

('X' SHALL SIGNIFY THE INTERVIEWEE AND 'L' THE INTERVIEWER)

L: ... (This is an interview) with Mr Anton Xaba at the ANC Office, on the 31st of May, 1995. It seems to me the SACP was the most active structure in Natal and 'Maritzburg in the 1940s. Were you concerned then, were you here then?

X: I was - in 19 - I was in my fifties, myself.

L: Yes.

X: That would have been in the 50s. The Communist Party was formed, it was there, but it was not yet clearly identified by ordinary people in the street. It was a very, what do you call, a sort of a secret organisation. It was difficult to identify, people didn't know about it. Except around those circles and in particular where you were meeting COSATU, SACTU meetings, the Chairman easily identified the difference between the ANC and the Party itself. That was ? like myself. I was early, I was fresh from the school and then I joined the ANC. It took some time for me to understand the Party itself. How it is - what it stands for - what's the difference between the Party and the ANC and the other organisations around the ANC. So it was not an easy deal for just an ordinary man in the street to happen to find out. But now, after being detained in 1960 - the state of emergency, where we were all together - the leadership was all together, in a sense, and so now we got classes now, proper classes in fact where you sit down and discuss each and every aspect - the formation of all the organisations in South Africa, APRO, the Coloured Peoples' Organisation, and the Indian Congress comes to the ANC Party to defend - and all the other what do you call, activities. In particular by the activists and when they are arriving in South Africa. And that was the formation of each and every people, in particular in our country which we know about it, besides the, what do you call, the development of South Africa itself, I think it has quite arrived in South Africa? Before happened, also. So that for any ordinary man in the - on the street, it is not easy to understand these things. Even now, we'll find sometimes you misinterpret what is being

1 said in the newspapers by the ANC and then they thought ANC wants to concentrate
2 power to itself alone. Which is not so. ANC totally is in the liberation movement. It's
3 a national movement, national organisation - aligned with other parties like ANC,
4 COSATU and so many other organisations, so that you cannot identify the ANC as being
5 influenced by the Communist Party. Although the Party said that they had been wrong
6 to blame, which you remember, the formation of Mkhonto Wesizwe - it was a joint
7 venture between the ANC and the Party itself. So that I myself, I had never been a
8 member of the Party, except just recently - I did, after 1990, I joined it and then I was
9 discouraged and I leave it alone and I say 'No, I don't think it is necessary for me to
10 continue with the Party once the ANC wishes the Liberation Movement; I should
11 concentrate my energy to that organisation that is the organisation of the people. I don't
12 know whether my explanation concerning the Party is satisfactory because there is a lot
13 of things that we could talk about, when you talk about parties and like when you early,
14 early what you call? 20s where JP Marx, Moses Kotane and many other, later on Gwala
15 and many others. In the Forties now.

16 L: Yes, Gwala and Madiba...

17 X: Yes.

18 L: ... joined the ANC in 1944.

19 X: In '44, yes.

20 L: When did you come to Natal?

21 X: Myself?

22 L: Yes.

23 X: No, I was born in Sobantu, Pietermaritzburg.

24 L: I thought you were a 'Maritzburg person.

25 X: Yes, I was born here, I was born here myself.

26 L: Yes.

27 X: So, Gwala too, he was not far, far from here because he's from New Hanover, but we are
28 not very far. He schooled, he was teaching, he was working in Edendale, was taking part in
29 organising things in the Party so it was easy for me to, to meet him early in my life when
30 I entered politics. So I have been with him more than thirty years now.

31 L: Yes, yes.

- 1 X: ...with Harry Gwala. We did more than that, because I remember when I joined the ANC,
2 I joined ANC in Durban, not here in Sobantu. Then there was no Sobantu Branch, there
3 was no ANC in Sobantu at that particular time, when I joined the ANC we started from
4 scratch to re-mobilise and organise the youth to join the ANC and all sort of things, which
5 was - it was not an easy thing to do, during that time because police harassment from the
6 Security Branch and people were very afraid. Once you belong to the ANC, they will
7 knock you and they become afraid of you - saying that they are 'phoning the police and
8 all sort of things to their families now, come causing problems. But if you have been
9 choosing to identify the real problem, the real problem was not the security, it was the
10 laws of the country, which were meant to destroy the human lives. So that I disrupted
11 whatever they say. My family told me not to participate in the thing, I was going to be
12 arrested and all sort of things but I insisted and I would continue until such time as I was
13 a full member of the ANC. Then I participated very hard, here in Pietermaritzburg, in
14 particular in my area - Sobantu, and Edendale.
- 15 L: There was a very good meeting in Sobantu, I think round about 1945..
- 16 X: Yes...
- 17 L: ... after Dube...
- 18 X: Yes...
- 19 L: ...? His succession was contested by, who was it? Mtimkulu? Abna?
- 20 X: Abna..
- 21 L: And Champion.
- 22 X: Yes, and champion...
- 23 L: It was a meeting which started, um, in the Methodist Church, in Church Street. ...
- 24 X: Church Street...
- 25 L: ... and continued to Sobantu. Was this before your time?
- 26 X: No, it's before my time, because whenever the politics shape you was no more in the
27 politics, he was leading the - what do you call - the Councillors, he was the Chairperson
28 of the Durban Councillors of the townships.
- 29 L: Yes.
- 30 X: And then I couldn't meet him, I only heard him speaking, but at that time he was about
31 declining in politics.

- 1 L: Did you join after the African/Indian Riots of '49.
- 2 X: Yes, just after that.
- 3 L: Just after that.
- 4 X: Because I was in school in '49
- 5 L: Ah, well...of course, of course...
- 6 X: I was still schooling?
- 7 L: Yes, of course. So, when Kliptown came along, were you a member?
- 8 X: 1954, yes. I was already a member then, 1954 and up to - from 1952, just before the
- 9 Defiance Campaign, after the Defiance Campaign, I joined the ANC. Because it made
- 10 me aware - I heard, I heard also the things that were happening in that days, So I was
- 11 interested and felt 'no this is the thing to do - to join and the fight is it what you call this?
- 12 apartheid. At that time there were committees for education? colour bar, all sorts of
- 13 names.
- 14 L: What about the All-In Conference in March '61, was it possible?
- 15 X: Yes, yes, yea, I knew Pietermaritzburg, Edendale.
- 16 L: Yes, could you tell us a bit.
- 17 X: That, that Conference it was meant to form the Mkhonto Wesizwe and to take initiative
- 18 from the people what to do next because on that Conference was a forty-member committee -
- 19 member committee of all the organisations, before that which met in Johannesburg, 1960,
- 20 after the state of emergency - because the ANC was banned as an organisation in that time
- 21 to decide what these new steps to do. Because people were trying to defy. Saying that
- 22 they won't go underground, the ANC is their organisation so they will defy it. And then
- 23 that was in, a meeting was contacted in Johannesburg, I don't know where about, where
- 24 a fourteen man committee was elected belonging - from all organisations including the
- 25 ANC, to draw a strategy. What, what will be the strategy for the next move. That's why
- 26 this conference now in 1961, was called, and that's where, now, because Mandela - all our
- 27 other leaders were banned, under house arrest and all sort of banning orders. So that no-
- 28 one was supposed to come and address this meeting because there was still on a Treason
- 29 Trial, it was still on that time. So that Mandela, unfortunately, the - we didn't know that
- 30 his banning order was, was going to expire during that period, so that he was a possible
- 31 man, comrade to come and address the meeting, here in Pietermaritzburg, 1961, when the

- 1 Congress was formed.
- 2 L: Yes, so you were present there?
- 3 X: I was present, yes.
- 4 L: Yes, yes.
- 5 X: But I wasn't, I was wearing the first badge of the Mkhonto Wesizwe - even to go abroad.
- 6 I remember I was arrested, in Northern Rhodesia at that time - that was Zambia. Zambia.
- 7 L: Yes.
- 8 X: And then they were taken back to South Africa, the British were active - because it was
- 9 a British Colony at that time.
- 10 L: Yes, yes.
- 11 X: And, in Rhodesia, the Federation of Malawi, South Africa, I mean the Federation of
- 12 Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia. Northern Rhodesia and Malawi - that was the federation
- 13 and they were saying ' ? At that time, ja.
- 14 L: That's right.
- 15 X: As I said, Sir Roy Welensky and then I was, I was among the first, in fact here in
- 16 Maritzburg I was the one of the first people to be sent for communist training.
- 17 L: Well, come on, can you tell us a bit about that? That would be very interesting.
- 18 X: No, we - in fact after being told that we were supposed to go for military training to start
- 19 the armed struggle, after that conference of 1961, because before that conference there
- 20 were some rumours around that we are going to be trained now to fight the government
- 21 because it's stubborn, Dr Verwoerd. It was very stubborn at that time ? So that, we - I -
- 22 then we were recruited and then we went to Johannes... went to Johannesburg, to
- 23 Botswana, Maputo, Rhodesia and into Zambia and we were arrested. I was arrested on
- 24 one week only.
- 25 L: And you were brought straight back to here ?
- 26 X: In fact we were deceived by the British Government, because we had a transit permit from
- 27 Botswana, we were supposed to be taken back to Botswana, but they deceived us, they
- 28 told us, 'look here, they are going to take you back to Botswana, where you belong,
- 29 because of permits.' They weren't doing it, they were just deceiving us. On our way
- 30 back, they put us in cars, they sent us straight to South Africa.
- 31 L: Mr Xaba, about how many were there of you?

- 1 X: We were a hundred and forty, 140 of - but we belonged from all South Africans, East
2 London, Cape Town, Port Elizabeth - all over South Africa. We were sixteen from Natal.
3 I was sent to Durban and Newcastle, there were people living in Charlestown there, we
4 were comrades together. we were 16, we joined the other group. We joined - in
5 Johannesburg, so we were told we were taken by kombis, right through - across the
6 border, until we are arrested. But I managed to escape, you see, in Zambia, in
7 Livingstone. I escaped myself - there were about five of us; we joined - remember it was
8 associated.
- 9 L: Yes, yes.
- 10 X: We managed to escape together to the - to William Cullinan? - who was killed - by the
11 South African forces in Maputo?
- 12 L: Yes.
- 13 X: He was a cousin to Gwala, that one
- 14 L: Is he? Yes.
- 15 X: He was the only one who was - who got discharged in the trial - in the second trial?
16 Because I was tried twice. I was sentenced first, ten years, myself, and then I came out
17 and after that ten years.
- 18 L: But, but if you escaped, when did they catch you?
- 19 X: They re-arrested me together with another comrade from Hammarsdale, Nzimande and
20 together with Joe Xabia? and Samson Fadale ? He's from Transkei and then we were
21 sleeping, in fact I was not sleeping myself, he was sleeping in that room, under the
22 guidance of a secretary of the NIP organisation of Kaunda, in Botswana, we were under
23 his guidance there. But unfortunately I don't know how we were spied. I think a lot of
24 informers in that area were - early in the morning, after my escape, and the following day.
25 I wake up in the morning, police were all over the place, looking for me...
- 26 L: Good heavens.
- 27 X: So we re-arrested again, and then we were taken back to jail and we were interrogated
28 and taken to Rhodesia - that is Zambia today, we were interrogated there too, we were
29 taken to Beit Bridge, where we were interrogated. And then we - then transferred to the
30 South African Police. So there, taken to Pretoria, where we met Comrade Mandela there
31 - he was doing his five years. Because he was sentenced in the court for what was it

1 October/November 1962, somewhere there. I was sentenced five years and we stayed
2 together with him there but although not in one cell, different section and then they
3 sentenced ten years for that - for trying to leave the country without passports and military
4 training. And then we came back here. When we came back - after having been sent -
5 been sentenced, we were taken to Robben Island. We finished our sentence and came out
6 in 1993. 1973, May 1973. And then after that we came out here - there was that Coup
7 d'etat which happened in Mozambique -1974...

8 L: Yes.

9 X: Which opens for us the gates to go to Swaziland and other areas. When that coup
10 happened and then we were given instructions that we must now start putting people to
11 go into the outside countries - in big numbers - that was the instruction we got and then
12 we start to recruit, you know. Up to 1975, when I was arrested, in November 1975, I
13 was arrested again then we were sentenced again in 1977, for life sentence, imprisonment.

14 L: So how long were you on the Island this time?

15 X: It's about fifteen, I spent a total of round about 26 years on Robben Island.

16 L: I had no idea it was so long.

17 X: Yes.

18 L: Yes.

19 X: I stayed there about twenty ... I was very young when I left home in 1960, in 1960...

20 L: Well, what year were you born?

21 X: I was born 1933.

22 L: Of course.

23 X: April. April 26th

24 L: Yes.

25 X: And then we left our what you call it? What I was trying to remember - then we were -
26 before my arrest, that is 1969, I had been arrested so many times, Potato Boycotts and
27 Beer Boycotts, so many things - do what you call Dipping Tank Boycotts, because we
28 were doing all those things at that time. Including that what you call, my dipping tank,
29 what you call.. Because you remember when Dr Margaret Mncand, from Ixopo, was
30 leading the Women League in defiance of these dipping tanks and pass laws. And then
31 I was sent to Robben Island there, after that, after that work until I was helped, I had

- 1 a stroke. 1990. March 1990, I had a stroke. I was hit by a stroke, very big stroke, I was
2 sent to Groote Schuur Hospital, I stayed for four months there - after that I have got a big
3 operation there. yes, yes.
- 4 L: Yes.
- 5 X: yes. ? I went to hospital and ? there was some damage inside my inside veins.
- 6 L: But you look so fit.
- 7 X: Last year I nearly died.
- 8 L: You've made a remarkable recovery.
- 9 X: Yes, that's why I'm no more working now with the ANC, because I cannot easily
10 concentrate now - many things - in particular when it comes to things that need to be
11 concentrated, only to find that ? All those things - I just stay at home. I do AIDS in
12 Jo`burg? Any time.
- 13 L: Mr Xaba, you say that you have started writing your biography.
- 14 X: Yes.
- 15 L: Now, have got that script, would you be able to...?
- 16 X: Unfortunately yesterday, after having talked to you, I went to that boy - that used to write
17 - we are writing together,...
- 18 L: Yes.
- 19 X: I went to him yesterday to tell him that he must bring it - I need it today. But today this
20 morning, I couldn't find him. He is the Secretary Msomi, that I can give to you any time.
- 21 L: Would you be prepared to give it to us? Because we would take great care, we would
22 photocopy and give you back the original.
- 23 X: Yes.
- 24 L: But we would be most grateful to have that.
- 25 X: No, I think I'll do this one detail now, because I've written a very detailed information in
26 that.
- 27 L: Because this is now history and it must be preserved.
- 28 X: Yes, I think so.
- 29 L: Yes.
- 30 X: Because I've mentioned so many things in that writing, like what you call, burning of
31 schools Because in 'Maritzburg is the first ever in South Africa to burn the schools,

1 people thought we were mad. But that was not our intention, to burn the schools, it was
2 the anger of the people during the riots because people were being killed, shot and killed
3 in Sobantu, so that they decided to go and burn the government institutions, the school
4 was one of them. Yes.

5 L: I'm just wondering, oh, yes, I think this machine is still working, it wasn't showing its little
6 light - so I was just checking on that.

7 X: Now, I don't know how - because there is a lot of things to say when we came to Robben
8 Island itself, a place which was very difficult. A place which was very difficult for - even
9 in-loco. We were working handcuffed, working handcuffed? Early in the morning, it's
10 winter time in Johannesburg, it's terrible, no shoes, no long trousers, no jerseys, nothing.
11 Only a light shirt, a khaki shirt, we used to wear, and we were walking on foot; we had
12 a lot of sores underneath, lot of sores. So that there are a lot of things which I do
13 continue with interpreting if we shall go back into.

14 L: Oh well, we would be so glad - we would be very grateful to have that.

15 X: Because I want to continue with this so that it must be completed, nicely completed.

16 L: I think so. Also what we are trying to get is - the Mzala biography of Baba Gwala. Now
17 it's in manuscript, ...

18 X: Yes.

19 L: ...but I'm going to ring Dr Menshego and see if she can give me Mrs Nxumalo's home
20 number.

21 X: Ja. 'Phone number.

22 L: Her daughter's ...

23 X: I've got it - I don't know, but they know it here. I think they must know Nxumalos,
24 where to call the 'phone number like that?

25 L: Well, Sibongile said she'd look and try and get it for me.

26 X: Try and get it - she will get it.

27 L: Yes, oh, because it's going to be very precious, this book and it should be published.

28 X: I think in 'Maritzburg, unfortunately, there's got a lot of history to the people, in fact...

29 L: This, this is exactly what we are trying to do - it has not been properly researched, it is rich
30 in political history - from the 1940s onwards. There are all sorts of people here.

31 X: ??In 'Maritzburg here initiated so many things in our struggle?

- 1 L: Yes.
- 2 X: So many things, very vital things too. I think the people of Sobantu, I congratulate them,
3 they, they although they are stubborn, but they were very good. Sobantu, was the first
4 what you call town in South Africa to define what you call City Councillors and elected
5 their own committee of twelve if you remember. It was ? Dozens.
- 6 L: Yes,...
- 7 ? : When was this?
- 8 X: That - early...
- 9 L: Not so very long ago?
- 10 X: It's around about 1980s, when we were in Robben Island - actually it's not 70s - but
11 I think it's the 80s.
- 12 L: I think so too
- 13 X: Yes.
- 14 L: I think so too. No 'Maritzburg is rich in history and it hasn't been noted or recorded ...
- 15 X: Yes.
- 16 L: ...and this ...
- 17 X: I once invited, one of the what you call. the - who's she? Kaunda, who is working for the
18 Witness?
- 19 L: Oh, Lakela.
- 20 X: Lakela. I usually invited her and I said to her 'look at it there are a lot of things which are
21 supposed to be published at this moment in our history.' They are very good and
22 necessary now.
- 23 L: Yes.
- 24 X: To mobilise the people, telling the people ? What is happening before.
- 25 L: Yes, exactly
- 26 X: But, he - she - ignore it - it was a good invitation.
- 27 L: She's a journalist - she is concerned with now. We are concerned with the past that we
28 want recorded on the tape and on paper.
- 29 X: That's right.
- 30 L: So may we come back to you?
- 31 X: Yes, you will come and make a what you call an appointment - you can just leave and tell

- 1 them when you want to see them - I just come from Sobantu.
- 2 L: That would be so kind. Now can I ask you a couple of other sort of little details?
- 3 X: Yes.
- 4 L: Now, Moses Mabhida, he was well, Secretary of SACTU in the late 50s, he was Acting
5 President of the ANC in '59, ...
- 6 X: That's right, yes.
- 7 L: He was Chairman of SACTU in 1960.
- 8 X: Yes.
- 9 L: When did he go into exile?
- 10 X: The very same year. The very same year. Because - after the state of emergency, after
11 the state of emergency, he managed to escape. In fact he was supposed to be detained
12 himself. They were detained, fortunately it was the withdrawal of the state of emergency
13 for a few hours because there was a technical mistake by the government ? So they were
14 released and fortunately for them, they escaped and then we couldn't get that chance here
15 in Pietermaritzburg - we managed to escape ourselves.
- 16 L: Now, in exile, he was on the National Executive.
- 17 X: Yes, yes.
- 18 L: ... Was he in Swaziland all the time or did he travel around a lot?
- 19 X: No, in Swaziland, he was a chief what you call initiative to talk to Sobuza, King Sobuza.
- 20 L: Yes.
- 21 X: To allow our people to be what you call...
- 22 L: Oh, I see, he was a liaison?
- 23 X: Yes.
- 24 L: I see.
- 25 X: He was staying there for some power for some few months, negotiating with the people
26 of Swaziland, the king in particular.
- 27 L: Because when he died, he was buried here. Now we felt of him as a 'Maritzburg person,
28 was I wrong? Was he a Durban person?
- 29 X: Not that I know - Mabhida is not buried here
- 30 L: Is he - or wasn't the Chairman of the ?
- 31 X: No, Mabhida is still in Mozambique, in Maputo.

- 1 L: Buried there?
- 2 X: Yes, what happened. Ja he's buried there.
- 3 L: Uh, uh.
- 4 X: What happened, the - they wanted to go and bring Mabhida back to South Africa to come
5 and bury him - that is his family and our people - they refused. They said the only people
6 they must go back is the family -all need to go bury him they think that Mabhida should
7 be brought back here so that he should be buried at his home.
- 8 L: With honour.
- 9 X: Yes, he is still there.
- 10 L: Yes, he is.
- 11 X: There is another one who died in, in 1967, the first comrade within the South African
12 forces. in Rhodesia. He was a President of a Youth League Mputi, he was a teacher.
13 Mputi.
- 14 L: Was he from Natal?
- 15 X: I don't know whether ...
- 16 L: ...or was he from the Transvaal.
- 17 X: He was from the Transvaal.
- 18 L: Mm.
- 19 X: He was from the Transvaal. He was a Secretary-General of the Youth League - he was
20 our Secretary - so he died there - he went together with Chris Hani and others. During
21 that period...-
- 22 L: Yes, yes. Now, Mr Xaba, I will get Emanuel Kunene's 'phone number from the Mayor
23 in Mpophomeni - who is that chap, who used to work as a SACP Office.
- 24 X: Mpophomeni Mayor?
- 25 L: Ja. I think he's the Mayor of Mpophomeni..?
- 26 X: Oh. Emanuel, Emanuel Kunene, ...
- 27 L: Yes.
- 28 X: Yes, I know him. You can't give me his 'phone number.
- 29 X: No. I'm sorry, I haven't got it.
- 30 L: Never mind, I'll try someone else. Baba Gwala said that you would be able to give me
31 his Mzwakhe Ngobe's 'phone number and his address in Mount Partridge.

- 1 X: I know his place - I can 'phone by the time you want to come to Msumi, I will bring him
2 here with me.
- 3 L: Tell me a little bit about him, because what my first visit to Baba Gwala, I asked him for
4 the names of the people I should be interviewing and Mzwake Ngobe was one of them.
- 5 X: Mzwake Ngobe in fact was working with NCD here - down there - in Victoria Street there
6 - he was a member of the SACTU Trade Union.
- 7 L: I see.
- 8 X: Yes. Bongwe could take you to go across, for military training, he was among the first of -
9 I recruited him in fact and worked together with him - when we were arrested we were
10 arrested together.
- 11 L: Oh, I see
- 12 X: But we meeting in Robben Island, we came back in 1972, because he was doing nine years
13 - we were doing ten years - he came 1972, and then he is working at Fort Napier Hospital.
14 he is working in town since then, he is going to take his pension this year. They
15 miscalculated his age and he is in fact even more age - still young but he is even more aged
16 - now he is going to be pensioned.
- 17 L: Well, now if he's still working there we should be able to see him without difficulty.
- 18 X: Ja. No, it's not difficult.
- 19 L: If I could ask you about that.
- 20 X: Yes.
- 21 L: And the charges laid against Baba Gwala in '64, are they in your manuscript?
- 22 X: I'm not sure now.
- 23 L: ? can't remember.
- 24 X: No, exactly if you got to the court - you can get these things in court.
- 25 L: Who were the lawyers? Do you remember that?
- 26 X: Uh, it was, ...
- 27 L: Would it be any use me asking someone like Phyllis Naidoo?
- 28 X: Ja, no, Phyllis Naidoo was not in that trial that time.
- 29 L: Yes.
- 30 X: She was the one who was in the second trial.
- 31 L: She was in the second trial, yes.

- 1 X: And we talk about '73 ...
- 2 L: Yes, yes.
- 3 X: You talk about '63 now.
- 4 L: Ja.
- 5 X: But you can get it, the trial was on, here in 'Maritzburg, 1965, if you can get the ? The
6 1965 cases, you find it.
- 7 L: Alright. Good. At what stage now, you may be too young to know this, but I had a note
8 that at some stage, Baba Gwala was Vice-President of the Natal ANC, now was he - or
9 was it the Natal ANC Youth League?
- 10 X: No, the ANC itself. He has never been in the Youth League, Gwala, never been in the
11 Youth League.
- 12 L: No, he was very much a Union man?
- 13 X: Yes.
- 14 X: He would not have been in this League.
- 15 L: I think you have given us a lot of really valuable leads and discussions. I am most grateful
16 and we would be most grateful to have the manuscript.
- 17 X: Okay, it's alright, I'll do that - make sure it will be done - I will go and find it - even today
18 I am still going to find that thing.
- 19 L: Is there anything else do you think we should ask?
- 20 ? Perhaps we'll come back about time ?
- 21 X: Ja.
- 22 L: If we could we come back with our little tape recorder. I'll play this through you see?
- 23 X: Okay, so that I know - I have no problem about that - you can come back and tape record
24 again.
- 25 L: This is a second interview with Mr Anton Xaba, at the University, Alan Paton Centre on
26 the 13th of July. He is going to speak about his memories of Comrade Harry Gwala.
- 27 X: Admittedly, after having been released from detention in 1960, under the state of
28 emergency, the following year which was memorable was 1961, because of its founding
29 of the Mkhonto Wesizwe, which was founded in that particular year. And then we went
30 on, up to 1963, where we were both arrested, sentenced to Robben Island. What I am
31 trying to show here is my close contact with Comrade Harry Gwala because myself,

1 himself and other comrades, we were so close for many years. Ever since we met
2 together, so that when we were in Robben Island, they were so strict that we couldn't
3 participate in any sports activities.... (end of side one of the tape).

4
5 (Second side of the tape)

6
7 X: They are so strict that we couldn't participate in any sports activities, but at the end of
8 1967, we were then allowed to start organising sports for ourselves, the inmates. So that
9 we formed some clubs there. There were about sixteen clubs which were formed,
10 differently by different comrades so that we form an association, football association,
11 rugby association, tennis association, and other indoor game sports which were - which
12 we were participating in in Robben Island. It happened at a certain stage when comrade,
13 not Comrade Gwala himself, but with other comrades, they participated in playing soccer.
14 It happened that he fell down and broke his right arm, just above his - what do you call
15 -arm pit..

16 L: wrist.

17 X: Yes, wrist. It took some time after that it healed because he went to hospital, he was put
18 under what you call cement, and then he came back and he stayed for some time. It was
19 later now, in the years, that is during the second time of his imprisonment in Robben
20 Island. We were together again there - I have mentioned that we were sentenced in 1977,
21 sentenced to life imprisonment together - he was accused number one, I was accused
22 number two. We went to Robben Island where round about 1981 to 82, this pain started
23 again in his right arm where he was once cemented as a result of his fall in - of his fall.
24 And then he complained that his arm was so painful, he keep on rubbing himself - or we
25 used to rub his arm to relieve his pain, but it continues until his arm was now failing to
26 hold anything even a pencil itself. He couldn't hold a pencil. So that it started failing, his
27 right arm. Then it failed, it started with the second arm, which thing I might want to call -
28 because there is a confusion here - what causes this - his what you call - poisoning - what
29 you call poisoning his system. Because when he went to Britain, the doctors there
30 mentioned something like his - he's got some poison. But how could he have got that
31 poison because in Robben Island there was no contact between ourselves and the Security

1 Police who might be suspected of capable of doing such a thing. But, there is only one
2 contact which one might suspect. It is when he was sent to a certain hospital after he has
3 broken his arm where direct contact with the medical doctors there. I don't say there
4 anything suspicious they might have done but one will always remain some suspicious
5 because security police of this country then were capable of doing anything. Even that,
6 it's possible they can have a contact with him, and poisoning his arm some way or other,
7 but I am not accusing anyone. Then when he was released, that is 1988, he went to
8 London to go and seek some help there because of his failing arms. Already they have
9 failed at that time. But he couldn't find a solution, except that he was told by the doctors
10 that it might have been poisoned, so that if one deals with this matter, it should bring all
11 possibilities so that the future generation can decide for itself. In passing there he was
12 released then in '88, I came out myself, 1990, after having been hit by a stroke in March
13 1990, sent to hospital - stayed there for four months. Released, July; then I came back.
14 I find Gwala still alive, moving around, with his duties of liberating our country. And then
15 he decided, after that we have met and then new structures were formed after the
16 unbanning of the ANC. He was a hard worker. He was a real engineer of all political
17 activities in this country - I can mention thousands of people whom he taught in Robben
18 Island - he was a teacher - a real teacher - a political teacher. He was a Marxist - a real
19 Marxist - you know - you know the so-called Marxist around the world. He knew what
20 he was looking for - he knew what his principles were meant to achieve. He
21 struggled a lot because there was that myth around our people in this country that
22 communism was intended to destroy our nation. But it wasn't the case. I remember
23 during his last days - I went to his home, I find him, when he was about to die - two days
24 later. He was very sick - this pain had moved now from his arms, from his neck, it was
25 down to his leg, he couldn't move - he couldn't move an inch with his leg. And then he
26 was taken to hospital on the following Monday he died. There are so many things, there
27 are so many people who are an asset today to our liberation struggle, to our people, who
28 passed his mind. He was a teacher, a real teacher, he taught a lot of people, coming,
29 making many of them in this country who today our country is free.

30 L: May I ask you a question? He had a very good epitaph put on his tombstone which was
31 something like 'build good socialism for a future?' Do you remember the exact words?

- 1 X: Although I may not remember the exact word, but they were more or less the same thing
2 that you are saying.
- 3 L: Yes, this is what reminded me. Did Bab Gwala choose those words himself, or did
4 someone else choose them?
- 5 X: In fact there is no one who can choose what you call something for a certain individual,
6 the history itself, his doings, his deeds, they choose those words for him.
- 7 L: Yes.
- 8 X: Yes, I think you can not choose for yourself what type of words must be put on a
9 tombstone. Then the people will decide which is the correct one, which fits the deeds
10 whilst you are still alive. I think that happened, the same thing happened to Gwala's
11 words which were written on his tombstone.
- 12 L: May I ask you something else as well. He came out in '89 and liberation didn't come until
13 1990. Was he not responsible for getting all the ANC structures, in the Midlands,
14 prepared and ready for that moment of liberation, before it actually came? Am I right?
- 15 X: Yes.
- 16 L: Tell us a bit about that. please.
- 17 X: When he was released, just immediately after his - I don't know whether after his
18 Comrade Walter Sisulu was released.
- 19 L: Yes.
- 20 X: And then Comrade Govan Mbeki was released, they formed - a what - Comrade Zuma,
21 who was already inside the country from exile, he was allowed to come into contact with
22 his three comrades I am mentioning. There was a liaison, what you call, a special
23 committee which was formed so that it must divide the country that is in regions.
24 Comrade Gwala was one of them, together with Comrade Sisulu and Govan Mbeki. I
25 think he participated in designing how to divide this what you call regions, before the what
26 you call, April election of 1907 - 1994.
- 27 L: Thank you.
- 28 X: Yes. I don't know whether it's right for me - because I remember at one stage it was said
29 in the papers he was a Stalinist or what you call a hard liner communist, but people were
30 wrong. Gwala was a principled man, he knew what he was fighting for - he knew his
31 stand - whether it was - you can call it a communist stand, or a socialist stand, or a local

1 ordinary capitalist stand, it's up to you, but what I know, Gwala was a real person in our
2 country - no one will ever close this gap, no one, I say no one because I know them.
3 Most of our comrades who are already in the government today have been with him in
4 Robben Island, for many years. So that I know what Gwala stands for. I know what his
5 what you call - students are standing for today. You may say anything but they were also
6 - I am only problemed about what Inkatha is doing, the IFP, the Inkatha Freedom Party,
7 which Gatsha Buthelezi keep on claiming in the newspapers that he once wrote to Gwala,
8 he was, he was corresponding with Harry Gwala - he is lying. There is no such. The only
9 time when Gwala wrote to - to Gatsha Buthelezi, it was when we were still on trial. That
10 time there - there was a need to come and collect some defence for our case where it were
11 accused of being, furthering the aims of the banned organisation and recruiting youngsters
12 for military training. That's right, we were doing that - that was not a crime - but there
13 was a need when Gatsha Buthelezi - that was to come and testify there in our trial.

14 L: What year was this, Mr Xaba?

15 X: Pardon?

16 L: Xaba. What year was this?

17 X: That was 1976.

18 L: Yes, thank you.

19 X: That was 1976, when we were on trial..

20 L: Yes..

21 X: .. in Pietermaritzburg.

22 L: This was between your two first, your first - both of you had a first imprisonment and then
23 a little gap.

24 X: Yes.

25 L: And then you both went back and had the life sentence...

26 X: ... together, yes.

27 L: Yes, I just wanted to get the date of it.

28 X: Ja, it was - it was in 60s - '76.

29 L: Yes.

30 X: But we were - we tried to contact - Buthelezi in 1977, the trial was on from 1976 up to
31 1977 when we were found guilty and sentenced. It is during that time that Comrade

1 Gwala wrote to - to Buthelezi - to try and get him to come and testify in our trial because
2 our trial was not a just and ordinary trial. This was a very serious trial, even the Judge
3 himself at the end of the trial, mentioned that he was supposed to give us death sentence
4 but from here, he calling his mercy. There was no mercy there, Justice Howard, he was
5 a cruel judge, he will remain so, because there was a lot of misinformation, and evidence
6 which was given by the police which was supposed not to be like that? But they found us
7 guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment. I think Comrade Gwala, but today we don't
8 say we expect to revenge, we are - we are politicians, we are deliberators of this country
9 so that we don't want any revenges to happen again. We just want our country to prosper
10 and continue to prosper but there are still these things must be seen, must be shown, for
11 the future generations - it must be put down - it must. This Commission of Truth, I
12 support it hundred percent, because these things must come out - there are a lot of them.
13 there are a lot of them, there are a lot of them. The way we were tortured in detention,
14 no one can ever deny that because it can happen to us, and although I was tortured so
15 many times in the police cells - I nearly died myself when - when Comrade Ndluli - Joseph
16 Ndluli of Lamontville - Nkotusi - was killed it was next to my cell when we were
17 interrogated together at the same day. I know that he died, I heard the police calling him
18 'come up Ndluli - why are you sleeping?' It was a funny thing because Ndluli has just
19 arrived in the police cell, within ten minutes, already he was dead. They must ...these are
20 the things which we - people should know about - the police must come out with this
21 information. So that, I think that's, that's enough.

22 L: Yes, you'd like to finish there?

23 X: Pardon?

24 L: Would like you to finish here. now?

25 X: Yes, I would like that.

26 L: Thank you very much indeed. (There is nothing further on the tape).