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RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Oral History Project of the Alan Paton Centre,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus

Interview with Dr Peter Brown
conducted by Prof. Norman Bromberger
in Pietermaritzburg
on 14 August 1995

1st interview in a series of 8

(Edited, corrected version)

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TAPE 10

KWAZULU/NATAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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NOTE: THIS IS AN EDITED VERSION OF THE TRANSCRIPT WITH NO DELETIONS OF SUBSTANCE, BUT SOME CORRECTIONS OF FACT AND IMPROVEMENT OF THE GRAMMAR AND COHERENCE OF THE TEXT.

INTERVIEW WITH PETER BROWN, CONDUCTED BY NORMAN BROMBERGER ON 14 AND 21 AUGUST, 1995, IN HILTON, NATAL.

12N: Right, I'll just say an introductory word. This is an interview with Peter Brown in his home in Pietermaritzburg, conducted by Norman Bromberger, taking place on the 14th of August, 1995. Peter, the intention is, I think, in this particular interview, to focus on your background and earlier years, and so perhaps, we could start by getting one thing clear - when you were born.

18P: The date? Okay. 24th of December, 1924.

19N: 24th of December, 1924. Okay. Did you have other brothers and sisters, or were you an only child?

21P: Yes.

22N: You did?

23P: One of each, of which I was the youngest in the family.

24N: Alright. What subsequent career did your brother follow, so that we can put that in place early on.

26P: Well, his name was Craig and he went into our family business, in Durban, which was a wholesale importing business. And he stayed there for the rest of his working life really.

29N: Is he still alive?

30P: Yes.

31N: And your sister presumably married

32P: Well, her name was Betty and she didn't marry, she died, I suppose, about ten years ago now. But she never married.

34N: Could you say something about your parents - who they were and where they came from?

36P: Well, I mentioned the family business, which was something called WG Brown and Co. And WG Brown was my grandfather who came from Scotland towards the end of the last century. Opened a trading store in Rietvlei up there, above the Karkloof. And from there, gravitated to Maritzburg where he became a small-time importer and wholesaler, and then eventually moved to Durban, where he became quite a big time wholesaler, supplying country stores with what, I regret to say, in those days, was called 'Kaffir Truck'. My Mother's family came earlier - they were part of the Byrne Settler scheme, and after various struggles and privations, settled at Nottingham Road where her grandfather farmed - stocking and developing the farm from the proceeds of transport-riding, an activity which was continued by some of the sons.. Her father was born and brought up there and he eventually, as the bright boy of the family, after attending Hilton College as a founder member, went to Edinburgh, to study medicine. And then practised in Durban for the rest of his life.

53N: That was your mother's father?

54P: Yes, he was Archibald McKenzie.

55N: And the quick outline you gave of the development of that wholesale business, that was pioneered by your grandfather?

1P: My Brown grandfather, my father went into that business too, and
2 he stayed there for the rest of his working life.
3N: Right. Is there anything you would like to say about your
4 relationships with your mother and father? Were you closer to one
5 than to the other, or is there anything of that sort which you
6 think might be worth reporting?
7P: Well, I was closer to her because he was actually killed when I was
8 about ten. So, you know, that relationship was a good
9 relationship, but it hadn't reached the stage of any great
10 intimacy, I suppose. And, so I really grew up with her.
1N: When you say your father was killed - uh...
1P: He was a great polo player, and in fact was killed here in
13 'Maritzburg, in 1935.
1N: In a polo accident?
1P: Yes.
1N: I didn't know people ...
1P: Yes, that happened...
1N: ...could have fatal accidents.... (Peter chuckles at this comment).
19 Did that affect the financial situation of the family?
2P: No, I don't think so - as I understand it, he must have left a
21 trust, which my mother proceeded to administer very effectively
22 with her brother-in-law, who was an attorney in Durban. Somebody
23 called Jim Hathorn, to whom Pat McKenzie was articled when he
24 studied law. So, I don't think it had any impact, really,
25 financially. Except, I suppose to the extent that later on - I was
26 independent, even during her lifetime, as a result of that bequest,
27 or whatever it was.
2N: At that time, 1935, when he was killed, was your Brown grandfather
29 still alive?
3P: No...
3N: Or had your father effectively taken over - he was head of the
32 business?
3P: Yes - he had taken over, yes.
3N: Good, right. And your relationship with your mother?
3P: That was close, but not demonstrative. I think that about sums it
36 up.
3N: Yes. Can you say anything more about her? She was the daughter
38 of a doctor - so was she herself, therefore, well educated,
39 interested in a range of ...?
4P: Yes, her family was one brother and ten sisters. Luckily for the
41 brother, he was the eldest, and he went on also to Edinburgh
42 University and became a surgeon. But the girls, I don't know
43 whether all of them, but certainly, in her case, she was sent to
44 school in England.
4N: I see....
4P: But, school was the end of it, I don't think that she followed on
47 at all after that. But she was a very well organised person -
48 involved in quite a lot of good works, but I think mainly in the
49 white community - I mean old age homes, in the war, running those
50 canteen things which they had in Durban, for passing troops, and
51 all that kind of thing.
5N: Yes...I know them...
5P: So she had wide interests, but they - I don't think they were sort
54 of cross-colour line interests particularly.
5N: No. The sort of thing I wondered was whether, and I may not be
56 getting the generations quite right here, but whether for instance,

1 when you were younger, she would read to you a lot or whether there
2 was perhaps a lot of literature, or things of that sort which were
3 passed on, or

4P: No

5N: Or not passed on particularly

6P: No, no - she was a detective novel reader, and I don't think she
7 was intellectual - she was much more a practical, down-to-earth
8 person, I think.

9N: Ja, ja. As regards schooling - would you have started school in
10 Durban?

1P: Yes, but only the very early years. My father was very involved
12 in - he was, I think, the Chairman of the Board of Governors of
13 both Cordwalles and Michaelhouse. He had been a foundation member
14 of Michaelhouse, and so I came here to Cordwalles, and I was there
15 when he was killed.

10N: I see...

1P: And then went on to Michaelhouse.

18N: When you say a foundation member, do you mean a ...

1P: Michaelhouse started here in 'Maritzburg, in fact it is having its
20 centenary next year, I think, and he was one of the first pupils
21 when it opened.

22N: Yes. I think you said he was Chairman of the Board of Governors
23 at Cordwalles and eventually, at Michaelhouse ...

2P: Ja..

25N: Now, how does something like that come about? I mean, clearly, he
26 was an old boy of Michaelhouse, then he is a man of wealth, as you
27 said, a major import business supplying a range of country stores
28 and so on - but does it also mean he had some kind of community
29 orientation? Was that the natural thing in those days, for a man
30 of his class, as it were, to - you know - involve himself with the
31 collective activities which somebody has to undertake. Government
32 is not doing everything, and people with resources and so forth
33 have a responsibility to perform some of those roles?

3P: Yes, I think that's right, as far as the schools were concerned.
35 I think Cordwalles started in 1912 - for all I know, he was one of
36 the instigators of that. Probably, as far as Michaelhouse was
37 concerned and I'm sure they still do it now - they go for old boys
38 and they think, well - they would be useful members of the Board,
39 but perhaps also good for a bit of cash.

4N: Yes...

4P: But that wasn't his only interest. I can remember as a child going
42 with him to something called St Martin's Homes in Durban and - -
43 and in Manning Road, an orphanage, I can't remember what it was
44 called. And I can remember, as a child, going there and waiting
45 outside. So he was obviously involved in that kind of thing too.

4N: It's just come to me that - it's true, isn't it that in Scotland,
47 there is a substantial emphasis on education?

4P: Oh yes ...

4N: Were you conscious of being of Scotch, or Scots, descent?

5P: Certainly, but more from my mother's side - than from his. I think
51 his was sort of lowland, west coast Scotland - whereas they were
52 true blue Highlanders.

5N: Aha. As you recall it, if one's thinking of government schools and
54 these private schools that we have been talking about - what would
55 have been the real point, as people like your father would have
56 seen it, of a private education at that stage of the game?

1P: I don't know. I have no recollection of him being particularly a
2 church-person, but the fact is that he was involved in these church
3 schools. I suppose that this was part of the mission of the church, to
4 go out and educate. Not only in the conventional black missionary
5 field, but also, I suppose, to try and get a grip on parts of the White
6 community too.

7N: Yes...Was there a sense from early on of these being quality
8 schools in the sense of perhaps from overseas, or better facilities
9you know, in addition to the religious emphasis and training?

1P: Well, I think they thought they were. They saw themselves as
11 quality schools, and I think, perhaps in a sense, they were, in
12 terms of at that time, facilities and so on.

1N: So right from the start they were quite well endowed?

1P: I don't know whether they couldn't have been financially well-
15 endowed then, it must have been the fees.

1N: Sorry,
1P: It must have been the fees ...
1N: I mean, endowed with facilities ...
1P: Yes, Ja...

2N: Talking a little earlier about your father not having any
21 particular, as far as you could tell, personal interest in religion
22 ...

2P: No, well, I don't know, I don't know whether - he didn't appear to
24 be that - he wasn't a regular church-goer...

2N: And your Mom?
2P: Nor was she.
2N: Nor was she. Yes. But it wasn't something that was discussed a lot
28 as you grew up - religion, at least from the home, was not a strong
29 (influence)?

3P: No, no...
3N: But, on the other hand, there wasn't a sceptical atmosphere..?
3P: No, no.
3N: You also spoke about the charitable works, the good works the - the
34 orphanages and so forth - and said, I think, that largely these
35 related to needs within the White community.

3P: Ja, I think that is right.

3N: Do you have a memory from either of your parents, or from the
38 family environment, of questions to do with either South African
39 politics in general, or racial politics, as things that were
40 discussed and thought about, or that either of them - even though
41 they didn't discuss them - nonetheless, held firm views about?

4P: Norman, I think they assumed that the order of things was as it
43 should be and that it would continue to be like that and I don't
44 think that - well, I was too young to know what their reaction to
45 Ghandi and that kind of thing would have been - but as far as
46 everyday talk was concerned, I don't think that Black politics was
47 a subject that came up at all. I think they were sort of
48 benevolent, not quite despots, but benevolent masters, as it were.

4N: Yes, yes...When you talked about your mother's family settling at
50 Nottingham Road, some part of that family were in farming, were
51 they?

5P: Yes, the eldest son of the original settler, who was Pat McKenzie's
53 grandfather, stayed on that old farm. The second son was my
54 grandfather. The third son became Sir Duncan McKenzie - who was
55 a great, and rather controversial, I think, military figure of
56 those days - Bombata Rebellion and Relief of Ladysmith and so on -

1 he was, I suspect, one of the founding members of the Natal
2 Carbineers. And he also eventually farmed nearby. There was a
3 fourth - the last brother - who moved away from there to Himeville,
4 and he wrote at least one socialist tract in the early part of this
5 century - which was not something you would expect from a son of
6 the Nottingham Road farmers. I haven't seen that tract, but he did
7 write it.

8N: Is there any family tradition about how that came about, what
9 influenced him?

10P: No, I don't know - the family historian was Pat McKenzie - he might
11 know.

12N: Yes, I see... your mother, however, was removed really from that
13 world, she basically grew up in Durban?

14P: Yes... and all her sisters married, scattered all over the place. One
15 of them married somebody who subsequently became a judge here, in Natal,
16 Piet de Wet, who was a great Smuts man, and as a result of that
17 marriage, I think, her family became, well, I wouldn't say active, but
18 fairly staunch Smuts people. Whereas there were other parts of the
19 family, and I think this applies to those who stayed at Nottingham Road,
20 who became Dominion Party. So there was a bit of tension, I think,
21 probably, over that. But on the whole, the family ties in those
22 families were very strong. I suppose if you had ten daughters, each one
23 had to look after the one below, and they were very close to each other,
24 those girls, I think.

25N: And the ties were strong enough to override the political
26 differences - is that what you implied?

27P: Ja, I think so.

28N: Yes, yes. Aha. To when does one date the Dominion Party?

29P: I think it was still in existence at the beginning of the war.
30 Stallard ...

31N: And it was a party with a Natal base?

32P: It had a type of Natal bias, certainly - I'm not sure that it
33 didn't have some support in the Eastern Cape too.

34N: Yes. Contacts with people of Indian descent : were some country
35 store keeping people, Indians at that stage, or not really?

36P: I'm sure there were. My father instituted an annual cricket match
37 in Durban between the staff of WG Brown and Co. and the local, I
38 suppose, probably Muslim traders. So that was probably quite an
39 innovation for those times. I've got a photograph of the two teams
40 at Nottingham Road. And I'm sure that a lot of their customers
41 were Indian traders.

42N: When you went to Cordwalles and then onto Michaelhouse, were there,
43 aspects of the school, were there personalities in the school -
44 either your contemporaries, or teachers - who left a mark on you,
45 or were of interest to you at the time?

46P: Cordwalles - on the whole, they were pretty remote, and the
47 Headmaster was a rather fearsome character called Jack Besant, of
48 whom everyone was dead scared. But interestingly enough, many
49 years later when I was banned, he was very supportive. But he was
50 an old man who by then had retired, and used to come over and see
51 me every now and again. I would have never have dreamed that there
52 was something like that in him from my experience of him at
53 school...Certainly at Michaelhouse one was much more likely to be
54 influenced, and there was, particularly under Snell F.R. - who
55 became the Rector the year after I got there - a very strong,
56 liberal input into the school. And certainly that had quite a

1 substantial influence.
2N: On you?
3P: Yes.
4N: And more widely?
5P: But there wasn't much contact with black schools, but he it was who
6 introduced a sort of exchange system with Adams College, once a
7 year, or something. Boys from Michaelhouse would go there, see the
8 boys, and the boys from Adams would come to Michaelhouse, spend a
9 week or something like that. And race relations was a subject
10 which you could take in post-matric. So that was certainly very
11 influential.
12N: Where was Snell from? Was he a South African?
13P: As they all tended to, he came from England. I think Ronald Currie
14 from the Eastern Cape was the first local Rector. He left, after
15 my first year, having received a call to go back to St Andrews in
16 Grahamstown to sort out some mess there, and then came Snell. It's
17 only recently really, since the war, that the staff has become
18 predominantly South African.
19N: Just to get the dates in order - when did you go to Michaelhouse?
20P: Well, it must have been 1938.
21N: '38. So, in other words, you were thirteen, going on fourteen,
22 that sort of age? And spent then ...?
23P: Four and a half years ...
24N: Four and a half years there. What kind of a curriculum did you
25 have? I don't really know what the standard curriculum was
26 then....did you have to do Afrikaans in those days?
27P: Ja, English, Afrikaans, Latin Latin couldn't have been compulsory
28 - I think you did Latin or Geography, something like that. Yes,
29 I'm sure that was it. History, Maths, and Physical Science
30 which seemed incomprehensible to me, but anyway, there it was...
31N: Apart from what you referred to Snell, and the possibility of doing
32 something like race relations as a subject in post-matric - was
33 there any thing in that standard curriculum which was stimulating
34 or exciting to you or...was it just part of what one did at school,
35 and your interests were really somewhere else?
36P: No, I think I certainly had more of an interest in the race
37 question than probably most of the others did, but apart from that,
38 one just sort of went along with the defined path of trying to pass
39 the matric', playing games, and so on.
40N: Yes. Was that interest quite sudden? You think you had more
41 interest in the race relations thing than most of the others - can
42 you explain that?
43P: No, I can't really. I think the little group of my immediate
44 friends, on the whole, were interested in that kind of thing, but
45 they would only have been a minority in the class.
46N: Now, would you say that your interest was actually being evoked by,
47 or fuelled by something that the school was offering you?
48P: Yes, because I don't think that was coming from home; I think that
49 what you are suggesting was in fact the case.
50N: And you spoke of exchanges with Adams and so on - do you remember
51 any other form that the interest took at that stage - material that
52 was discussed, perhaps, in the post-matric course - did it relate
53 just to South Africa, or was there some wider range, perhaps within
54 the British Empire, as it then was? Or..
55P: Well, I don't remember that - but, I think there must have been
56 some of that because during those war years there were people on

1 the staff who were refugees or whatever, from the Far East and so
2 on. And I am sure they would have introduced some of that. But
3 I don't remember that.

4N: Before going on, if we may, to pursue that a little, and broaden
5 it out on the main subjects themselves, the English,
6 Afrikaans, Latin, the rest of it. Were there any of those subjects
7 that you took to ...? I mean, were you - in addition to being, I
8 imagine, a games fellow - were you also a scholar? Was studying
9 at school simply what was required of you, or was it part of your
10 self-image that you took an interest in intellectual things, or
11 ...?

12P: No, I didn't

13N: That wasn't how you were in school.

14P: I was quite good at passing exams - not so good at remembering what
15 I learnt a year later...

16N: So your results were quite reasonable were they?

17P: Yes, sort of below the top - between the average and the top, but
18 I was, on the whole, a couple of years younger than the other
19 people who were there - in the class. But, I think that only was
20 the result of my pre-Cordwalles school in Durban. And by the time
21 I got to Cordwalles, I was moved up a class, and so I got into an
22 age group which was above my own - so I don't think it was any
23 great brilliance on my part - that was just luck, in a way.

24N: I remember at my school we had a teacher - I don't know that he was
25 the best master but he was a bit unusual, he wrote plays in his
26 spare time, and talked to us about world affairs instead of the
27 Great Trek, Were there any masters of that sort, perhaps in
28 History, or ..?

29P: I don't think so. But there was Current Affairs, which you got at
30 the top of the school.

31N: I see...

32P: But that was current, and I suppose, inevitably, was mainly about
33 what was happening in the war at that time.

34N: So that was institutionalised, that was part of the syllabus,
35 actually?

36P: Well, it was at the time .. but it wasn't something that you did exams
37 on...

38N: I've certainly come across the view and it is quite widespread that
39 in the UK and here, the experience of War - involving people moving
40 out of their accustomed niches, travelling about, seeing other
41 lifestyles, having the USSR as an ally - stirred up social
42 relations and led to a political ferment of a sort, a raising of
43 political expectations, with the Atlantic Charter being defined and
44 so on. Would you when you talked about current affairs in a school
45 like yours, as you grew up during the War against Hitler, that
46 there was some influence of these new ideas which was coming
47 through?

48P: Yes, I think there must have been, but whether in that early part
49 of the War, I don't know. But it was certainly the case later on.
50 At the end of the War, one had the National War Memorial Health
51 Foundation started up from within the army, really. That was where
52 that came from. That wasn't dealing with the major issues of the
53 time, but certainly it was a recognition that everything at home
54 wasn't as it should be. But I don't think those issues were so
55 prominent at all, while I was still at school.

56N: So, you got to Michaelhouse in about '38, and you stayed there for

1 four and a half years, which takes us to somewhere in '42 or
2 thereabouts. I picked up somewhere that you were Headboy.

3P: Yes.

4N: Was that something expected? It wasn't a surprise when you stepped,
5 naturally, into the Headboy's shoes, was it?

6P: I don't know, it happened anyway.

7N: Yes. It's of some interest to me - that question of people who get
8 selected out as leaders (let's call them - in some or other sense
9 of the word), and the processes by which it happens, and what the
10 qualities are which are decisive when decisions of that kind are
11 made. How would you describe yourself in relation to these
12 questions? Were you a sportsman, were there other dimensions,
13 other areas of activity in which you had taken a lead, or shown
14 quality?

1P: I suppose I was - I don't know - I had probably been there longer
16 than anyone else. But, no, I suppose they try and assess somebody
17 that they think may be able to do the job fairly adequately. Yes,
18 I suppose they try and look for somebody who has the capacity to
19 get the loyalty of the school - something like that, I suppose.

2N: Were you a sportsman?

2P: Yes, not brilliant, but I played for the rugby and cricket teams,
22 squash and so on...

2N: What kind of things did the Headboy do? Did the prefects run a
24 disciplinary system themselves, caning and so on?

2P: Yes, all that stuff... (they chuckle)... but on the whole, within
26 your house...

2N: I see...

2P: But, as the Head of the school, there might be an occasion, I
29 suppose, when you would have to step in if there was some sort of
30 school disciplinary problem, and we used to meet regularly with the
31 Rector and discuss what was happening and that kind of thing.

3N: I can remember when I was at Wynberg Boys' High in the Cape in -
33 would it have been? - either '51, or '52, our rugby team was on
34 tour from the Cape, and we went through - I can't remember if it
35 was Michaelhouse or Hilton, or both, and all the prefects could
36 talk about when they came back was the extraordinary kind of powers
37 that the prefects had exercised in these schools - you know,
38 excusing themselves for a moment to go and cane somebody. But our
39 Headmaster trod on any suggestion of similar powers for us - he
40 would have none of thatja... You said after four and a half
41 years - is that because you left in the middle of an academic year?

4P: Well, in the post-matric year.

4N: In the post-matric year, and that would have been to go into the
44 army?

4P: Ja..

4N: So you kind of left as early as you could? Was that it?

4P: Well, as early as I could to get into the army.

4N: Yes. I have no experience of that kind of choice, my father was
49 actually a conscientious objector, so I didn't even do cadets at
50 school. Can you say something about that choice, was it simply the
51 obvious thing to do - or was it in fact a difficult choice that you
52 thought a lot about?

5P: No, no - never thought about it at all. Obvious thing to do. It
54 wasn't because I was drawn in any way to the military life, because
55 I hated cadets at school too. But, there was no question that that
56 was what one wanted to do as soon as one got out of school, and

1 parents, of course, tried to hold it up or postpone it for as long
2 as they could, I think.
3N: Your older brother stayed in the business, did he? Or did he go
4 as well?
5P: No, he'd gone, he'd gone to the navy, right at the beginning of the
6 war.
7N: I see.
8P: So we really didn't see him, he went to the Far East and that's
9 where he stayed right through.
10N: So the business - it would have had to be run by managers - and
11 would they have come from family
12P: Well, yes, when my father was killed, they brought back the sister
13 that married an Englishman, who ran the London office of the firm.
14

15(Second side)

16N: Alright, this is the continuation of the interview with Peter Brown
17 on the 14th of August, 1995. The point we had reached, was about
18 the family business during wartime, and I think you were explaining
19 that a son-in-law of your father's - would it have been?
20P: No, brother-in-law.
21N: Brother-in-law of your father's, yes, they had come out from
22 England to help run it?
23P: Yes.
24N: It seems the obvious thing to talk about now, for a bit, would be
25 war time, and your experience in war. I think we had got you to
26 about '42, or early '43, somewhere thereabouts?
27P: Late '42.
28N: Late '42. Perhaps you'd just talk about the war experience in a
29 narrative sense, how you were involved in the war?
30P: Yes, well, I had started off by going to the recruiting office in
31 Durban where I joined the Tank Corps. By that stage of the war,
32 most of the individual regiments were already involved, either up
33 north, or somewhere, but you couldn't get into one of those, you
34 had to go into one of these more amorphous things. So I joined the
35 Tank Corps, and was sent to a place called Kaffirskraal, somewhere
36 near Cullinan, in the Transvaal for basic training. And then, what
37 happened not long after that was they took a whole lot of us who
38 had joined the Tank Corps, and put us into the Signal Corps, which
39 is where we didn't want to go, but there was nothing we could do
40 about it. Anyway, we proceeded with training, first at
41 Kaffirskraal, and then we went to Piet Retief, to a camp there.
42 And then, I suppose, they were starting to build up the Sixth
43 Division in late 1942 and early 1943, and so we, who were now
44 signallers, became part of that buildup, and eventually ended up
45 in a camp, I don't know where it was, somewhere in the Transvaal,
46 called Balloon. And that was, I suppose, a mustering point for the
47 new Sixth Division. By that time, of course, the Second Division
48 had gone, largely disappeared into prisoner-of-war camps at Tobruk,
49 and the First Division was post-Alamein, approaching the point
50 where it was going to be brought back here on leave, and the Second
51 Division was going to be the South African presence in the Middle
52 East. So after a while at Balloon, they put us onto the train and
53 they brought us here to 'Maritzburg at Hay Paddock (now Hayfields),
54 where, again, we sat around for a while, and eventually were, one
55 night taken by train to Durban and put onto a troop ship which was
56 the Isle de France and set off for Egypt. And there we stayed

1 training for quite a long time - I don't know how long it was,
2 probably almost a year. And at the end of that period, again, a
3 troop ship across the Mediterranean to Italy, and there we
4 disembarked, and eventually became involved in the advance up
5 Italy. And by then our signal unit was attached to the Eleventh
6 Armoured Brigade which was a brigade which had three tank regiments
7 in it and one infantry regiment. The tank regiments being the
8 Pretoria Regiment and the SSB and the Prince Alfred's Guards from
9 the Eastern Cape, and the infantry regiment was a combination of
10 the I.L.H. (Imperial Light Horse) and the Kimberly Regiment. And
11 we, our particular signal unit, was attached to that infantry
12 regiment in that armoured brigade. So we then proceeded up Italy,
13 with various stops and starts, and with that infantry regiment
14 spent most of that winter, of 1944/45 in the Appenines, would that
15 have been? We went into that range, north of Florence across Italy
16 - I've forgotten what it's called. And then in the spring of 1945,
17 in the last offensive, we took part in that, and eventually ended
18 up near Milan where the war ended.

19N: Aha..

20P: And that was that.

21N: During that advance up Italy, did you have battle experience? I'm
22 afraid I have no first-hand war experience, or any kind of
23 imaginative sense of what the war experience was like. You'll have
24 to fell in the picture. Just to start somewhere, were you close
25 to the combat, or somewhere distant from it?

26P: Norman, our job was a rather unromantic one of stringing these
27 infantry platoons together, with telephone wire. So our job was
28 to hook up the company of headquarters with an infantry company to
29 see that that communication was kept going. So, the actual
30 business of shooting Germans, didn't happen in our case. What we
31 were mainly subjected to was shelling and mortar fire, and that
32 kind of thing. And if the wire was cut by a shell or a mortar
33 bomb, well then you had to go out and fix it. So, it wasn't
34 glamour stuff at all. But, I think, that, probably like most
35 wartime experiences, one started off by being braver than one ended
36 up being. So that whereas being shelled was regarded as a sort of
37 heroic experience in the beginning, by the end you were wishing it
38 wouldn't happen.

39N: No... The sight and sound of the casualties of war being brought
40 in - field clinics. You would have had some experience of that?

41P: Oh, yes, yes. Well, I mean it was a messy business. But, I suppose
42 the most important part of that experience, from my point of view,
43 was that one came into contact with a cross-section of white South
44 African society, anyway, which probably wouldn't have happened
45 otherwise. And made very substantial friendships with people from
46 all layers of our society. So that was very good for somebody like
47 me.

48N: Can you elaborate on that a little? Were they the sort of
49 friendships which tended to be confined to the war period, and then
50 one went one's separate ways? Did any of them outlast the war?

51P: Yes, they did. But, in the end, the passage of time, and distance,
52 and so on - they became very diluted by that.

53N: Yes..

54P: Although I still get a newsletter - one came the other day which
55 somebody in that unit has been producing ever since then. And,
56 now, mostly it is a list of who's died since the last one came out,

1 and names that don't mean a thing anymore. But every now and
2 again, you get somebody's name , somebody you knew there and that
3 jogs your memory. For a while, one of my best friends was a chap
4 who was a white miner. And I would never have met anyone like that
5 in the normal course of life. So, that certainly was a broadening
6 experience.

7N: Did you experience it as broadening experience at the time, or were
8 you kind of...?

9P: No, I think, probably in retrospect. At the time, one just took
10 people as they were.

11N: You were very young at this stage, I mean, you were ...?

12P: I was seventeen when I went, but there were lots of other people
13 like that. There was one chap, about my age, that was with us
14 right through, and after about two years or something, they
15 suddenly discovered that he'd joined up under a false name -
16 because his parents didn't want him to. We'd been calling him
17 Holmes, or something for three years, and suddenly he turned out
18 not to be Holmes at all.

19N: The support staff for some of these South African Army activities,
20 some of the drivers and ambulance men and so on, were Coloured, or
21 African - in some sections...

22P: Yes, they were. I don't remember Africans as being close to us at
23 any time, but, certainly, there were the Coloured people. And very
24 often they were officers' batmen. One effect the war had, I think,
25 was to establish a sort of other rank/officer, sort of class
26 conflict. I was on the lower - the bottom end - of that class
27 conflict, and that probably didn't do me any harm either.

28N: What kind of rank did you hold, were you called a signaller, or ..?

29P: Yes, I was a private.

30N: A private?

31P: Ja.

32N: And you stayed a private?

33P: I stayed a private.

34N: Yes. That wasn't something that bothered you at the time?

35P: No. It would have bothered me if I had been promoted.

36N: I find it so difficult to conceive of what that experience must
37 have been like. You talked about shelling and by the time you had
38 finished, relief that you didn't have to undergo this any more and
39 having proximity to the experience of people being wounded and the
40 messy business of war. Were there kind of obvious ways in which
41 you coped with that stress? Really what I am saying, I suppose,
42 is: soldiers are supposed to drink a lot when they get the
43 opportunity - or I don't know

44P: No, no. I'm sure that's so, I'm sure that's so. Certainly - we
45 were probably stuck in Italy for six months after the end of the
46 war. And, again in Egypt for another few months - waiting for
47 transport back. There was nothing else to do except go out and
48 have a booze-up.

49N: Just speaking about Italy itself: I guess, given your
50 circumstances, you didn't really have much of an opportunity to see
51 Italy as a tourist, or were there some opportunities after the war
52 was ended? Milan, and so on...?

53P: Our unit was actually the first into Florence, but we went in and
54 out the other end of it. I had a few days leave in Rome and then
55 Milan, we were billeted quite close to it at the end of the war,
56 so we saw more of it. But, not much by way of sight seeing. What

1 we did do is we - a group of us got a week's leave during that
2 period, after the end of the war, and we went to Germany. And
3 through Munich, and Nuremberg and places like that and so we were
4 able to see the terrible devastation in those places. And, of
5 course, the terrible poverty of those people who had nothing to eat
6 and ... dressed in rags most of them

7N: So, back to Egypt, spend some time there and then, I suppose, back
8 to the Union of South Africa?

9P: Ja.

10N: By what kind of date would that have been?

11P: Early 1946.

12N: So you're twenty-three at that stage?

13P: Twenty-one I was. I had my twenty-first birthday in Egypt, on the
14 way back.

15N: Okay. Could you on reflection, looking back to the war experience,
16 identify influences it had on you, apart from the ones that you've
17 already mentioned?

18P: There was certainly one, but I don't know whether it was an
19 influence. Certainly what the war did do, I think, was produce a
20 sort of special relationship between people who had been in it
21 opposed to those who had been too young, or whatever, so that one
22 had somehow some point of contact with anyone who had been there.
23 And I think that persists - even now. There was another effect
24 which it had on me, initially anyway. I've told you how at school
25 this race relations thing had become an interest of mine. I
26 certainly came back and thought: 'Well, to hell with it, this
27 world now owes me a peaceful life.' And I, initially anyway, had
28 no urge to get involved in that kind of thing again. And, I
29 suppose I had to be shaken out of that, before I did begin to get
30 involved again.

31N: Peter, your desire to retire into a more private life - please
32 explain a bit....

33P: My mother, at that time was established at Mooi River, farming.
34 Well, I thought, that's a good life for me, I'll go and farm and
35 that will be it....

36N: Right, well that didn't happen, or it did, I suppose, in the sense
37 that you began

38P: Yes, I did. And then, the family had always had a Cambridge
39 connection, through my father, and then my brother. I didn't know
40 this, but they'd booked me in automatically. I don't know how
41 these things happened in those days, but I think if you had been
42 to a college, then your offspring were top of the list.

43N: Your father had been to Cambridge? And your brother, you say?

44P: Yes. So I found myself booked there and although I had started
45 farming, trying to learn how to farm, I was persuaded to go to
46 Cambridge to do Agriculture there because they did have quite a
47 famous Agricultural Faculty. Footlooseness was also - part of a
48 post-war experience for many people. So when this came up as a
49 possibility, I thought, well, there's another escape for another
50 year or two before I do anything serious. So that's where I went.

51N: And ... I seem to remember you having said, at some stage, that it
52 was a short stay - or have I got that wrong?

53P: Yes, it was. Because while I was doing this Agricultural course,
54 news came that there was to be a meeting - sort of anti-South
55 African meeting, anti the South African regime of that time
56 meeting. And word went out that we should all go to this thing and

1 I don't know what - jeer or catcall, or boo, or whatever. I don't
2 know who that meeting was organised by, but I suspect, in
3 retrospect, that it was, if not the local Communist body, some
4 bunch of fellow travellers. But the main draw card was Peter
5 Abrahams, who by that time had probably had a book or two
6 published. And it was really his account of what it was like to
7 be Black in South Africa which one heckled at the time but went
8 back and thought about. That made me decide that I better get
9 involved in something else apart from learning how to be a farmer.
10 And so when I decided that, then I wrote to my mother to tell her
11 this, and I'm sure she was disappointed, but anyway she went and
12 consulted Edgar Brookes about what I should do. He said: "Well,
13 he should go to UCT - there's the best department to take a course
14 in - and do the course in Native Law and Administration" - which
15 is what I then did.

16N: Now, that seems a very big decision to take when the things
17 precipitating it wouldn't seem to be all that substantial. You go
18 to one meeting, that sets you thinking and that perhaps links up
19 with some interests of yours before in race relations. And then
20 you leave Cambridge and come back to South Africa. Now, was the
21 idea that when you came back that you would continue with the
22 agriculture, or would that be set aside, and you would really
23 launch yourself at this new interest?

24P: I suppose I should say I organised a group of people, and we came
25 back by land from England. We bought an old army truck which
26 proceeded to break down at awkward moments along the way, and we
27 came back through France and Spain and then down through the Sahara
28 to Chad and Brazzaville - it's still got the same name, I think -
29 and Leopoldville and Stanleyville - which have changed their names
30 since then - and then to Nairobi, and then down here. So, one saw
31 Africa, or parts of it. But, I think in answer to your question,
32 I suppose if it hadn't been for the war I probably would have got
33 involved in the race relations thing when I left school - quite
34 likely. So the Peter Abrahams' experience, really, just brought
35 one back to that point.

36N: When you say that Peter, what kind of thing would that have meant -
37 that you would have got involved in "the race relations thing"?

38P: Doing good, trying to do good.

39N: Yes. In this case...

40P: I might also have been influenced by - I hadn't thought of it - a
41 contemporary of my brother's at school who had won a Rhodes
42 Scholarship, just before the war and hadn't been able to take it
43 up. He was in the NMR a, the Natal Mounted Rifles. He had been
44 up North and come back and he was on the same troopship as I was,
45 going North again. I used to go and talk, and chat a bit, and he
46 had decided that he was going to get into what was then Native
47 Administration. He was going to do his Rhodes Scholarship and then
48 go into that. I suppose that's what I was thinking of - trying to
49 do something in that kind of field, where, pre-1948, it was
50 possible to do something. You remember there was an old chap
51 called Bang here, who ran the local Native, Municipal Native
52 Administration Department, and I think a chap like that probably
53 managed to do quite a lot of good work. So I was looking at that
54 kind of thing. It was probably along those lines that my mother
55 spoke to Edgar Brookes. So he said, 'Cape Town for that'.

56N: Was there any family connection with Edgar Brookes particularly,

1 or did she simply turn to him as a ...?

2P: I don't know how she knew him.

3N: He was also Senator Brookes, wasn't he, or had been a Native
4 Representative Senator, is that correct?

5P: Edgar was the Natal Senator, yes.

6N: Yes, and just getting back to that Cambridge experience and so on,
7 and your saying that, in a sense, Abrahams put you back on track;
8 in some sense the farming thing was quite a jump, wasn't it? Would
9 you say there had been anything in your background which had been
10 preparing you for farming?

1P: No, but I'd always been interested.

1N: Oh, I see.

1P: 'Cause my mother's sister - the sister closest to her - was married
14 to a chap who farmed in the Karkloof, my father's sister was
15 married to someone who farmed at Nottingham Road. She had a cousin
16 who farmed at Lions Bush, and I used to go and stay with these
17 people.

1N: Oh, I see.

1P: And, I liked it. And then, before he died, my father bought this
20 place at Mooi River, which I must confess was as much as anything
21 to send his polo ponies to have a rest on. It wasn't a big farm.
22 But my mother had made it her headquarters.

2N: And why had she done that?

2P: Well, she did it after the war because she handed over her house
25 in Durban to my sister virtually - and she also liked it. She
26 always used to keep fowls in Durban, and we always had horses in
27 the backyard. And her father up there in Musgrave Road where the
28 big Catholic Church is - that was his home - and he always had two
29 cows there and his son, my uncle, further up Musgrave Road, they
30 kept cows and horses.

3N: Fancy that...

3P: And that was the 1930s.

3N: Yes, the Municipal bye-laws allowed it?

3P: Yes, yes. Oh yes, they used to come and cart away the horse manure
35 and....(they chuckle).

3N: Ja, so, UCT - and we are what? In about '47, or ...?

3P: '48, 'cause I came back from Cambridge in 1947, having gone there
38 in late '46.

3N: So '48, oddlyfive years before I got to U.C.T. And the idea
40 was to do a course in Native Law and Administration. Was Jack
41 Simons there at that stage, or....?

4P: Yes, yes.

4N: Yes. Was the plan to do a degree with Native Law and
44 Administration as a major?

4P: No, those were all two year courses. (Later explanation: Peter
46 Brown registered for a Diploma in Native Law and Administration,
47 a 2-year course, but stayed for a third year and obtained a B.A.)

4N: Aha, I see.

4P: My major was Xhosa, which was a three-year course. I did Social
50 Anthropology, Native Law and Administration, and Xhosa, basically.
51 Also Economics, which I didn't understand, and Archaeology, which
52 I didn't really understand either.

5N: And Xhosa because they didn't have Zulu available?

5P: No, they didn't.

5N: And who was the Anthropologist at that stage?

5P: Shapera.

1N: Shapera. And Simons, Native Law and Administration? Was Iestrade
2 there? No?
3P: Yes, yes. And A.C. Jordan was there..
4N: Was AC Jordan there?
5P: Ja..
6N: I certainly remember him something like ten years later - that's
7 the father of Pallo Jordan, who's now famous....How did it strike
8 you, I mean UCT, when you got there? Was there any excitement
9 about the thing at all or not really?
10P: Norman, it was run by the ex-servicemen, I mean that was the SRC.
11 I don't know whether there was anyone on the SRC who wasn't an ex-
12 serviceman. There were some Nats Lapa Munnik, for instance.
13N: Did he become an Administrator?
14P: He ended up as the bloody Administrator, he used to be the Cheer
15 Leader at the Inter-Varsities....(they chuckle)...But the SRC was
16 dominated by ex-serviceman, and I think the staff were a bit
17 frightened of them. Because there were people there who had been
18 six years in the war and been decorated and God knows what else and
19 the staff didn't know quite what to do with them. But, on the
20 whole, they were a wild, but responsible lot. And we lived in
21 Belsen.
22N: Were you in Belsen?
23P: Ja.
24N: Before it became Driekoppen?
25P: Yes, it became more respectable.

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28**SECOND INTERVIEW, 21ST AUGUST, 1995.**

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31N: This is the second interview, taking place on the 21st of August,
32 at Peter Brown's home. The first interview took up most of the
33 first and second sides of the first tape, but a small part of this
34 interview will be on the second side of this first tape. Peter,
35 we left the story, last interview, with you at Cape Town, UCT,
36 embarked on a degree in subjects associated with, and subjects that
37 might train one for a job in, Native Administration, or something
38 of that sort, on the advice of Brookes, Edgar Brookes (I almost
39 said Alan Brookes) ... And you were talking about the importance,
40 in the University, at that time, of the ex-servicemen. Twice, in
41 talking about their influence, I think you referred to the running
42 of the SRC. Could you say something about the SRC, and student
43 politics - whether you had yourself any interest in it at that
44 time? And somewhat more generally, what you remember about the
45 political environment, at that time as you were beginning to study.
46 We have got to 1948, which, I suppose, sees a major change. So,
47 it's first of all the student politics on the campus, whether you
48 had any interest in it, or participation, and then more generally,
49 the political environment as you recall it..
50P: Norman, the student politics, as I recall, were about ... I
51 suppose, progressive UP was the dominant element. And the people
52 who were active were, as far as I was aware, mainly colleagues from
53 Belsen. I'm not sure that there was much very positive about those
54 politics as you said, the 1948 election was looming. Most of us,
55 had never voted in an election, apart from the one in 1943, when
56 we were in Egypt, or somewhere, so we had never gone through this

1 process. I can't actually remember voting, but I must have done
2 a postal vote, for somewhere in Natal, I suppose. Or it may even
3 have even been that the UP was not opposed in any constituency,
4 because my home address was Durban, at that stage. When I say,
5 progressive UP, I think that's right, and I remember, for instance,
6 that one of our fellow students stood in George, it must have been
7 against PW Botha that might have been in the Provincial Council,
8 (I don't remember) but he did stand and he didn't win. Generally,
9 I suppose, student politics, from our point of view, was aimed at
10 trying to ensure that ex-servicemen got what they felt were their
11 just deserts - I think it was, very often, negotiations on various
12 issues ...I mean there was that whole system then of terms of
13 which, if you had been in the war, and you hadn't got a matric' you
14 could do a sort of 'quick-fix' matric' over a very short period.
15 And there were people in Medical School was that route. I know
16 there was someone who I was at school with here, who left because
17 he wanted to join the navy before he was roped into infantry. And
18 then came back and did a quick-fix matric', and then proceeded to
19 Medical School. So, I think, probably the SRC was largely
20 interested in those sort of financial and other problems of the ex-
21 servicemen. But I must confess that I look no part.
22N: Were you tempted at all, I mean did you consider it? Or was that
23 not really on your agenda at that stage?
24P: No, it wasn't on my agenda.
25N: Had you some personal experience of Afrikaner Nationalism at this
26 time, or was it just something 'out there' somewhere?
27P: No, I
28(end of first tape, second side).

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