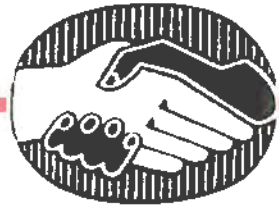


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The Alan Paton Centre
& Struggle Archives



RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE

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

Interview with Jean van Riet,
 Liberal Party member, at his farm,
 Baralong, Excelsior, Free State
 on 15 September 1998
 conducted by Prof. David Welsh
 and Peter Brown

4th interview in a series of 4

The interviewee has agreed to open access for use by researchers,
 students and members of the public.

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KWAZULU-NATAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**Fourth interview with Jean van Riet at Baralong Farm,
Excelsior, Free State, on 15 September 1998
conducted by David Welsh and Peter Brown**

1 D: Good morning - this is Tuesday, the 15th of September and we are recording with Jean van
2 Riet - it's a lovely day here on Baralong and the sun is shining - now Jean - please tell me
3 the - Boere Oorlog stories that you told me last night - they are wonderful.

4 J: Ja, well - as I told you - David there's quite a number of stories that my father told me about -
5 but I think we'll just relate the one - and give you an idea of what it was and how - what a
6 difference it was with war at that time compared to what happens in wars today. Any war
7 is bad - but that war - compared today - you would nearly call it a gentleman's war and what
8 happened I want to tell you about there was - the Boers were fighting against the British in
9 a certain area where it was stones and bushy country and the Boers had tied their horses -
10 they always do that. They would leave a couple of Burgers with their horses behind the hill
11 and they hold the horses - at least - in case the battle goes against them - they retreat and get
12 onto their horses and escape. But during this battle - with the stones and bushes - as I said -
13 they were fighting close to one another and my father saw there was an Englishman with his
14 head behind a rock. But his feet was behind bushes - but you could see the - his tummy was
15 sort of - exposed and he felt it rather a bad thing to shoot a man in his tummy - but war is war
16 and things were getting tough and what else can you do? And eventually he decided he
17 should and he shot this man and as he shot him he could see that this man rolled over and he
18 knew that he had hit him. So, but the British was too strong and the Boers had to retreat -
19 they got back and they got on their horses and chased away - but now - way back in 1905, this
20 of course - took place during the War - the Anglo-Boer War of 19 - 1898 - 1902 - but 1905
21 when the Gladstone - in the Free State and the Transvaal got a sort of a crown colony status
22 and my father was in the Volksraad and they were in a club together and as usual the men
23 standing around, having a couple of drinks and they were talking about one thing and another
24 - but as the war - had not been over such a long time ago and the new Gladstone government-

1 being kind to the Boers - the - the war business came up in their discussions often. So my
2 father said 'You know this happened.' He says the place where it was and so on and he said
3 'You know it's funny.' he says 'This thing - it worries me always that I shot a man in his
4 stomach - kill a man or shoot him in his stomach .' But he had no sooner told the story when
5 a man standing not far away - also some chaps having a discussion, came over and he said
6 'Excuse me gentlemen, I couldn't help overhearing what you were saying, and I happen to
7 be the man you shot.' You could just imagine everyone was at that - so - true enough - they
8 went into the cloakroom there and he pulled up his shirt and his trousers down and there he
9 exposed his tummy with a wound - right across his tummy - as he lay down probably his
10 tummy was flat on the ground and the bullet has just grazed and tore his stomach and none
11 of his intestines - you see. So he got well enough and so then - anyway, my father and this
12 chap whose name happened to be Featherstone - they shook hands on it and he said to this
13 chap - he said 'My goodness man, you must come home and meet my people.' And yes,
14 sure enough he did - he went home and believe it or not - he fell in love with my father's
15 youngest sister - Aunt Nettie - and he married her. Now this chap Featherstone was
16 connected to the mining business and he - later in life was at Koffiefontein - with a mine over
17 there and we went over from Thaba 'Nchu - by cart - to - to visit them - they had no children
18 - my Aunt Bettie and this Featherstone. But you know it - when you think of this - he's really
19 like a fairytale - but anyway there remain quite a number of other stories - but I just thought
20 I'll tell you this one over here and it's - I - it's funny - it always tickles me.

21 D: And it's wonderful, and Jean tell me - tell us the other one - where your ...

22 J: With the Colonel?

23 D: With the Colonel, yes that's right.

24 J: Well that was another incident where the - the fighting took place between the Boers and the
25 British and the Boers were getting the best of the battle and eventually the - the British had
26 to retreat - now as they retreated - on the way there were a number of soldiers killed - both
27 sides of course - and wounded - but the Republican forces, excuse me - the republican forces
28 did not have the facilities of Red Cross and things like that - they were very primitive - they
29 had a bit but not much - and there was amongst the wounded over there was a Colonel and

1 my father said to this chap, he said 'Look if you promise to God that you will not take up
2 arms against the Republic force again -' he says 'I'll send you to your people.' By that time
3 the British were more or less three miles away and oh he was only too pleased and my father
4 used a falcon net in the war? - he loaded this chap onto a spider. You know what a spider is -
5 with four wheels and anyway - horses - and a white flag and a couple of boguses - they took
6 this - they took this Colonel back to his people where he was treated. Now some months
7 after that my father was captured and the - the Boer prisoners of War - ? as usual, loaded into
8 cattle trucks and taken down to Cape Town and Simonstown where they were put on a - on
9 a boat and the prisoners either went to Bermuda, or Ceylon - or a - or a ...

10 D: St Helena?

11 J: Or Saint Helena - where - where of course Napoleon was a prisoner. Anyway, as my father
12 was in the truck and the - the cattle truck with the rails - as he looked through and who
13 should be walking on the pavement next to the ? he saw this Colonel - he recognised him at
14 once and he said 'Hey, hey' hey.' So this chap came very closer and had a look. 'My God'
15 he says 'Is it you?' you know, and in no time he had - and now - because they let the
16 prisoners out to stretch their legs and gave them food before the train moved onto
17 Simonstown - but my - this Colonel - and he said to my dad, he said 'Look,' now he says
18 'Uh, I, I - you did me a great favour, and' he says 'What can I do for you?' My father said
19 'Now look, the women, are now being put into concentration camps all over the place - in
20 Bloemfontein and different places - but my wife is in Wepener with two - with two children
21 and you can arrange to get her to Aliwal North from Wepener which is not very far - but if
22 you could get her over there - they - they have family and they will not go to concentration
23 camps - and they'll be able to survive over there without going to this camp and - and after
24 a while he - he again said to - he said to my father, he says 'Now look, what about - would
25 you - what about you going to join your people in Aliwal?' And my father of course was
26 astounded - he couldn't believe what he was hearing - but this chap said 'Right' So he said
27 'Now look I'll send you over with a letter to the Officer in Charge in Aliwal North.' There
28 was a very big English camp, and they had all the facilities there - they had tennis courts and
29 they had ten billiard tables there and everything - it was a very big camp and he sent my

1 father under escort with this letter to the officer in charge at Aliwal and uh, when my father
2 got there he'd only been there a day or two what should happen? Here comes his wife with
3 my - my two sisters - and you could just imagine the joy of these people together - as he
4 reported to the - the officer in charge he said 'Right.' he said 'You'll be on parole - but
5 you've got to report to the - at the camp every morning and every evening you've got to
6 report.' So of course that was fine and then the family over there the de Wets - there were
7 quite a number of de Wet family over there - they gave..

8 D: This is your mother's family?

9 J: My mother's family, yes. My mother was a de Wet she was a second cousin to General de
10 Wet. However, they got two rooms to stay in - and my father - he had to go to the camp
11 every day to report - in the morning and the evening - had to go - it was not long when he
12 was another - a new people there and - you know some of the officers knew. My father
13 happened to be a very good billiard player - as a matter of fact he was champion in the Free
14 State for many years and it was not long when he was enjoying a game of billiards with the
15 officers and it so happened that afterwards over there they'd have a drink or two too much
16 and start talking and saying things that they really shouldn't say - but my father overheard
17 that there was a certain British convoy coming - uh a train that would come with this
18 provisions and so my father now he immediately was short of - as we say in Afrikaans a riet
19 telegram - a very sort of knew what was happening more or less around the country also and
20 he knew there was General Conroy was in the vicinity of that - more or less around there -
21 now my father had got hold of a couple of Friesland cattle - two or three cows which he was
22 milking and selling milk and he had a boy by the name of Adam to look after and so the
23 milking with these cattle and when he heard this he said to Adam, 'Adam - he gave him a
24 note to Conroy - there at this - they must waylay this British convoy that's coming - they
25 must de-rail the thing and then grab all the - the provisions on it - that was - more or less
26 getting to the end of the war - four months before the end of the war and by that time - the
27 Boers when they started the war - they all had mausers - but by that time they had no - very
28 few mausers left and very few ammunition - so what happened - they - when they got the
29 British - they took their guns and their ammunition - they were fighting with Lemantfords?

1 And - more than half the people were fighting with the Mesher? Anyway - he sent Adam off
 2 to go and give this letter to Conroy but he said 'Look Adam, if you see anybody about - any
 3 soldier or anybody about - don't tear this letter up - eat it, swallow it - for goodness sake -
 4 don't let anybody get hold of it.' And Adam went off and he said 'They ask anything - if
 5 they do interrogate you and ask you what are you doing - you must say 'Ek soek my Baas se
 6 beeste.' ' And Adam had a blaek as round - he was a kierie as if he was just like a herd boy -
 7 and well - sure enough there was a Britishb around and they - they asked him - they said
 8 'What are you doing here - what are you doing?' you know - so he said he's looking for his -
 9 you know - 'You're not? Who you working for?' They recognised that he's the boy that
 10 works for my father - you know - anyway - they - they - how Conroy got the message
 11 somehow or found about - they did get that convoy - they derailed the train and they - they -
 12 got most of - most of - all the provisions - but my - the camp, was so suspicious but what
 13 really gave the trouble was - Adam, instead of getting going home - when they interrogate
 14 him, - they said 'You work for this chap van Riet?' And he got such a scare - he didn't go
 15 home - he - he cleared off to Basutoland and that of course made a suspicion on my father
 16 and after - they called him in and they asked him 'What is he doing - has he anything to do
 17 with this?' and so on and where is his boy and that and he says he doesn't know -he just very
 18 - he says 'He's really in trouble without his servant.' he says 'His servant has bugged off
 19 and he doesn't know anything like that you know. But evidently they didn't believe his story
 20 too well and they did not court marshall him - but they did - put him on the train and sent him
 21 down to Simonstown and sent him down and my father landed in Bermuda as a prisoner of
 22 war for the last three months of the war and so - ja. that's a -

23 D: And you've still got the letters your father wrote to your mother?

24 J: I still, yes, I have a couple of letters that my father wrote to my mother at that time.

25 D: What - what were conditions like on Bermuda, Jean?

26 J: No, I to all - I think it was quite good as a matter of fact a little while ago a cousin of mine -
 27 Jan van Riet Louw - and he was very fond of my father, John, and he went to Bermuda and
 28 he said that he'd like to go and inspect the place where his uncle - he's very fond of his uncle
 29 and he'd like to go and see - well, they call it Long Island or si - and when he told the

1 authorities why he was over there - they were pleased about it - as a matter of fact they really
2 treated him well and he went over there - and I must show you the snaps - I've got snaps over
3 here and there is also a packet of quite a number of the prisoners died over there - but the
4 conditions I don't think were bad at all - I think they were treated all right - of course it's not
5 far from the tropics and it is pretty hot - but that- that was - that didn't matter you know and
6 you must remind me David - I must show you a - because John over there he - he - he got -
7 he took a couple of nice, very nice snaps of - of the place all around there. Ja.

8 D: When did your father actually die, Jean?

9 J: Dad died just about- about eighteen years ago now -

10 D: Oh really - so you ?

11 J: More or less, yes, so - fifteen - eighteen years ago - his mother died not really long after - you
12 know about a year or two after him she also died but my father was ill and we decided to take
13 him home - the doctors said 'Maybe the sea air will do him good.' And so we went down
14 to East London and outside East London - Qwelegga way there is a place called 'Glen Gariff
15 Hotel over there and we stayed in that hotel but there my father's health deteriorated and he
16 got worse and eventually it was so bad that we took him into East London and he was
17 hospitalised in the Nursing Home of the Catholic Church over there and I must say this - they
18 were - they were so kind to us and so they looked after ? of him and it happened to be during
19 holiday time and there was - all accommodation was taken up but people were kind - they -
20 they found out about this and some private people gave us a place to stay and one or two -
21 it was no joke - because all the family went down eventually on account of my father - he
22 died. I shall never forget Tom Baker - a friend of mine - he was a surgeon at - he's a doctor
23 there at East London and he was also attending to my father there and John and my brother
24 and myself we were standing at his bedside and uh, then my father reckoned - I still said to
25 dad I said 'Father.' ek se 'How voel jy.' Hy se and he very slowly said 'Ek le lekker.' 'I am
26 very comfortable.' and we stood - ? friends we - and believe it it was not a quarter of an hour
27 that we looked and all of a sudden he was just passing away and he died with the three of us
28 standing next to his bed.

29 D: How old was he when he died - eighty two I think - eighty two, eighty three - anyway we

1 brought him up to Thaba 'Nchu and he's buried in Thaba 'Nchu - we brought him up here
 2 and of course the family was there and we lived there so many, many years - it was after the
 3 Anglo Boer War - because the family was in Wepener - but then they moved from Wepener
 4 to Thaba 'Nchu - that was really our home town - this Thaba 'Nchu place is just a small little
 5 town - but very sporty - there was ag, always a good cricket team., Good tennis players and
 6 all sports over there - gymkhanas too with the horses and that and the reed streaking ? and
 7 all that sort of thing. Thaba 'Nchu now - as a child of course, that mountain over there - I
 8 could nearly say 'I know every stone.' Because we'd go up - very often over a Saturday and
 9 go up the mountain over there - and behind the mountain there is a very thick bush there
 10 below the caves and they even killed a leopard there - and there were leopards over there -
 11 today they have the Sun City gambling place - called a Thaba 'Nchu Sun - that is situated just
 12 behind the mountain over there. Yes. Still this Thaba 'Nchu mountain is quite an historical
 13 place in a couple of ways - you know when the Boer - Afrikaner people trekked up from the
 14 Cape - that - at Kroonstad - then Sarel Cilliers was leading a - a convoy - what would you
 15 call of were they wagons and they were attacked by Mzilikatze and they just managed to
 16 come off the - ? just with their lives - all their cattle and - they lost everything barring their
 17 lives and then the Baroko chief - Chief Baroko founded from Thaba 'Nchu, sent draft
 18 animals up and everything and he took all the Boers back to Thaba 'Nchu and looked after
 19 them there - he gave them food until more trekkers came up from the Cape and they joined
 20 over there as they went further into Natal or whatever - yes and my mother raise we call in
 21 Thaba 'Nchu - as you get in Thaba 'Nchu from the Excelsior side - from the north side
 22 there's a church there called the - the um, uh, the Skuld kerk in Afrikaans - my mother's ?
 23 she was a - got this thing organised as appreciation what the Baroka people did to her people
 24 and her people - she got this church built and it's still there today - it's used as a school - but
 25 it is there today, ja. The Ere Skip.

26 D: The Debt of Honour?

27 J: The Debt of Honour - it's called the - ja - the Debt of Honour Skip and the church is there
 28 still today. Another thing about - on top of Thaba 'Nchu man, all along and the hills on the
 29 side you find there's a stone wall - made all - right all along and only where the precipice was

1 high - it would stop and start again further on - but that was the border line between two big
 2 chiefs the Baroko and Sapinare and they very often used to have fights and things like that -
 3 but that was the demarcation line between these two tribes - Sapinare and Baroko and the
 4 wall is there today still - this - some parts of it has broken down - but I - mean it's there still -
 5 something like the Wall of China.

6 D: Jean, can you tell me something more about your friendship with Jim Maroka, of the ANC..

7 J: Well, Jim Moroko? - he's - Jim was about ten years older than I am but when I was - in my
 8 father's - or articled to my father's office - a lawyer's office in Thaba 'Nchu - the Baroko
 9 people were our clients and in that way - I got - we got befriended and we remained friends
 10 all the way until the - until he died afterwards and his mother was usually - you know - his
 11 mother's name was Maggie - Maggie Moroko and she did - most of the work was in her
 12 name - but Jim he would come along you know with her over there and - well that was way
 13 back in - when was that - 1925, '26 - '24 round about there - so ever since we've been friends
 14 over there. He was a very clever doctor - especially as far as the stomach was concerned.
 15 On one occasion, my son Johnny here had a lot of trouble with his bladder ? he couldn't get
 16 it right - the ? doctors - he went into Bloemfontein - they could do nothing and then
 17 somebody said he must go and see Dr Slabbert I think it is in Pretoria - I said 'Johnny, before
 18 you go to Dr Slabbert - you go to see Jim.' I phoned up Jim, I said 'Jim, I - want to bring
 19 Johnny, I'm not happy he's having trouble and they can't get him fix him.' 'Ja' he said
 20 'Kom.' So when I got over there I - there's always horse - so many people over there to see
 21 him - but I just know - I walked past his window over there and then they - he sees me and
 22 then I come in through the back door and I took Johnny in there and believe me what the
 23 other doctors couldn't do - Jim had him on his feet and as fresh as a daisy within two weeks.
 24 You know - I think with the experiences he has with Black people - with their stomachs with
 25 different - what do you call - there's so many...

26 D: Parasites?

27 J: Yes, para - but - wat noem a mens - I - I you have special - ag ek weet nou nie..

28 D: Wat is die Afrikaanse woord?

29 J: Uh, not - ek kan nou rerig dui wat ek - I can't just think of it - ag but you have stomach

1 trouble - and I think the experience he has over there has made him so good - but people
2 came right from the Cape and from Transvaal - I mean there was Black people, White people
3 over there - and they kept going there all the time - so he was very - and what was nice about
4 Jim ...I know of a couple of White children - like dinges - Stadler - Jan Stadler - who became
5 - he was a big shot especially in the government - eventually with the government services
6 and a couple of others too - but he had White and Black children - he had educated at his
7 expense - ja and he often said to me 'Well Jean, some of them - some of them made fools of
8 themselves and I lost my money on them because they turned out drunkards and that - but
9 that doesn't put me off - I can just get some of them - most of them I just say I made a
10 success of them - ja, ja.

11 D: Did you talk politics with him? Quite a lot?

12 J: Oh yes, oh yes, now look he was - Jim was the type - he was a - the chief of the ANC - but
13 he was found guilty under the Act - Statutory Communism Act and he was sort of banned
14 and I used to go and play tennis with him - over there - he had a tennis court at this house -
15 close to Baroko Hospital over there - and we - I don't know how - whenever he passed over
16 here - he'd drop in and have a meal with me and we'd chat - we were very - we were very
17 close friends, ja. On one occasion - which was quite a - Black people were not sort of
18 allowed into the Kruger National Park, and I took him up to the Kruger Park over there you
19 know and we slept of course in this - because we could sleep in the same rondavel - because
20 we were together but you had to sort of do it on the QT. And - yes, ja - and he enjoyed that
21 very much. My brother, ? the three of us went together - yes, ja, ja.

22 D: When did Moroko die - was - it in the 60s wasn't it?

23 J: No, man, no I think he's a bit later...

24 D: A bit later? Yes...

25 J: Ja, he was later ag I cannot say the exact date but it was later than the sixties - it would have
26 been more in the seventies. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Towards the end over there - his
27 mind was slipping very badly because I know - many people that asked that they want to go
28 and see him but they found that he - his mind was playing tricks with him - he was not senile
29 - but he was not - cohese or what do you call it?

1 D: Coherent?

2 J: Ja, ja, ja and - ja - but he kept on - he kept on doctoring as for - very long until very late in
3 life, yes. But he only had one child - Kanusi and Kanusi is the same age as my son Johnny
4 and they used to often play together.

5 D: Is he a doctor as well?

6 J: Khanusi? No he turned out a bad egg - he drank himself to death... ja, no Khanusi he was
7 dinges and it was a very sad state of affairs - there was a very big ? funeral - I went over of
8 course and I think that was a - that was a -what shall I say - a sad part of the life's of Jim's
9 ? to loose his son - ja, anyway - let's put it off for the time. I was fond of Alec, Alan and I
10 often used to see him...

11 D: Alan, Alan Paton? This is?

12 J: Alan Paton - I often used to go and see him - personally without you know - not in politically
13 - just went to see him and visit him with his wife Dorrie - I was very fond of Dorrie and I -
14 I think she just - it was difficult - she had emphys..

15 D: Emphysema?

16 J: Yes, and I - she was very often it was difficult for her with her and when she died over ?
17 Alan of course he married his secretary - Anne...

18 D: Anne?

19 J: ... and I - I could never get on with Anne, she was a - a slave driver and whereas - maybe she
20 tended well with him but I can tell you this - Alan and I would sit down in his study and have
21 a nice chat and then every now and then she'd be there and interfering and getting Alan - on
22 one or two occasions - it really got under his collar - you know - he was a fellow - but
23 anyway that is just by the way. And I think Peter - I always..

24 D: This is Peter Brown?

25 J: Peter Brown, yes - but a man that I was very fond of and we became very close friends was
26 Ernie - Ernie Wentzel - and I'm very fond of Ernie - he was a very fine chap - Ernie of course
27 lost one of his sons - committed suicide and that was a very very bard knock for him Now
28 I saw a lot of Ernie - he used to come down to me here very often - we had cases over here -
29 next to my farm here is a big reserve - two reserves - called Rooibult and Saliba and they -
30 with this

31 There is nothing more on this side of the tape. There is nothing on the second side.