

24/1/85

PC16/5/4/21



The day before Sharpeville, as I remember it, was one of suspense -- and doubt. Suspense, because the PAC was about to launch its anti-pass campaign, and had called on black people throughout the country to go peacefully to police stations and hand in their passes. Doubt, because we had seen so many campaigns wilt in the face of the power of the state, and wondered whether this would just be another.

Then the shock of the radio announcements of the shootings and, next morning, the dramatic pictures of terrified people fleeing from the scene, and others of what they left behind them.

After the initial shock of all this one's principal recollection is of the tremendous excitement of the next few days. As it so happened the National Committee of the Liberal Party was meeting in Johannesburg that week. The country was in turmoil, the feeling that real change was on the way at last, was everywhere. The ANC had joined the anti-pass campaign, initiated by the PAC, and had called on people to burn their passes. Chief Luthuli had burnt his- in the home of a LP member as it so happened - and while our National Committee meeting was in session somebody burst in to say that the pass laws had been suspended. There was uproar.

I remember very well leaving that meeting and being taken to a dingy back-room in the depths of downtown Johannesburg to meet the one member of the PAC executive not in gaol, the person appointed to stay out and attend to the needs of the dependants of people who had gone to gaol, to discuss with him how all those families were to be cared for. Lawyer members of the Party were amongst a team taking statements from the wounded at Baragwanath, and had horrifying stories to tell of what they had seen and heard there.

I remember driving back to Natal from that meeting with a box of leaflets calling for support for the anti-pass campaign and the stay-away which was being planned, and our throwing them out at road party gangs -- who ~~looked~~ watched us disappear out of sight as if we were crazy.

And then when excitement and expectations were at their height, there came the emergency.

Notes for A.S. Paton

for Outlook article