

An interview used in "Attacking the Heart of Apartheid: The ANC's MK Special Operations Unit" (Penguin, 2025), Yunus Carrim

MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Abraham Pule

Johannesburg (telephonically)

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Cde Abraham, I know your family background because your brother, Ernest, dealt with that at length. So, we don't need to cover that. But perhaps you can briefly mention your place and date of birth and other personal details and a bit about how you became politically aware?

I was born on 25 February 1941 in Ramotswa in Botswana. My mother was sick when she was pregnant and she went there and gave birth to me there, but I'm from a village called Witleigat, which is in South Africa, in what is now known as the North West Province.

The first time I got involved politically was in 1956 when I joined the ANC. We were fighting against the Pass system; that was the big Pass you had to carry; you would cover it in a paper bag because it couldn't get into your pockets. We opposed that Pass. It was just men that had to carry it.

Then they started saying that our women should carry Passes as well. It is where we began stronger opposition to it. We all started burning our passes and fighting against the Pass laws. We said no, we are not going to carry Passes because everywhere you went, you must have that Pass or else you get arrested.

Women organised a big march to Pretoria to protest against the Pass Laws.

At the end of that year we left Sophiatown, and we separated to go to the different villages in what is now called the North West province to get people to burn Passes. The Chiefs were against that and one got killed so they ran like ten devils. I remember when we went to one area, the Chief ran away on a horse and when he arrived at the police station at Zeerust, the horse died. The police started looking for us. We ran to Botswana – the border was nearby. We were there for five days and we escaped arrest.

When we came back we reported to the ANC about what happened and what we have done, which was what they wanted us to do.

Chief Albert Luthuli was the ANC President then and we used to listen to his stories. He was a Chief but he didn't like the way the government was ruling the Chiefs and forcing people in the villages to sell their plots and cattle and go to work in the White areas.

We were students at that time and the government didn't care if you had passes, but older people had to have Passes to work. They got paid little money whereas the bosses were making lots of money. And the workers were staying in very cramped accommodation – a family of 5 or 6 in one room. But the Whites were staying in big comfortable houses.

And the government didn't want to engage us. They felt who are we to have better places? We said to them but this is our country, Whites came here from other countries and they were also exporting goods from here to other countries that we couldn't even afford to buy. And we don't appreciate that from the government. They just took us for granted – so we had to fight back.

The Whites took our land from us by force. Before that time our fathers did have a lot of cattle and crops that we were surviving on. They were ploughing with those cattle although we didn't have machines or tractors, but we were living properly and had food.

Chief Luthuli told the government you can't rule me because I have my people to rule.



Abraham Pule

When Ernest told that he's going to be leaving the country, what was your response?

I supported him. I said, look there's no other alternative, you need to go to the ANC in Lusaka, and join the army. Maybe you could then be based in Botswana. We will always meet and discuss everything. When you need help, I will always be there.

So, how did you link up with him again when he was out of the country?

It was while he was in Botswana. I went to see him using my passport. We met in '80 when he was now a soldier. I agreed to organise guys here to go and join the army, to help them make a way out of here to get to people on the other side of the border to pick them up. I took most of them as I knew the borders of Botswana. Our village, Witkleigat, was just next to the border.

Can you remember about how many people you arranged to go across?

Many, many – but that was over many years.

But at some stage you weren't just routing recruits across the border, but also bringing in arms into the country?

During the war, Ernest told me that they were running short of soldiers and we needed to start training people inside the country to be soldiers, how to fight and how to use ammunition. Also, those who were trained and come back I must assist them more. I must find places for them to stay in villages and other places, even in the Free State and in Durban.

I mustn't let anybody know about them and their activities. And when I find them a place to stay they must not be known to people there for what they are doing. And preferably I must find them outside rooms of houses to stay in.

In that outside room they can hide their arms. I had to also assist them in their activities, for example, checking with them where we can attack the police or army and what arms we should use. Sometimes after they carried out their activities, they had to be moved to another place.

I kept in touch with Ernest. Sometimes he was in Zambia. Sometimes I had to send people back to him to go to the ANC camps.

I often discussed the targets with Ernest. We carried out attacks in the Free State and the comrades came back quickly to Joburg after that. The police were looking for us that side. Some of the comrades moved to Durban. They were going to look for police stations to hit.

But I made a blunder and got arrested with some others. It was a lady who sold us out – a Botswanan but she was working with the Boers. She gave me money to buy her something in South Africa. So, I bought it and gave it to her and I told her I'm going back to South Africa again with some weapons in my car. When I came into the country there were many, many soldiers – and they stopped me and searched my car, they couldn't get anything.

Then I proceeded but I was stopped again at a roadblock. There were more soldiers. While they were searching for my car, a car came along from Zeerust. It had that lady, (name withheld), in it, but they passed my car and stopped a distance from us. The soldiers were just about to give me my car keys to let me go, but a captain shouted to them and said 'no, don't give that man the keys of the car, search that car again. That car has got something hidden inside.'

They opened the backseat – and found the weapons lying there. That's how I got arrested.

How did you get to know that woman that sold you out?

Our father left our mother to go and stay in Botswana and that lady was a cousin of the lady he was there with. We didn't expect she will sell us out. She knew my wife.

So what happens after you get arrested

They took me to the police station. But they nearly made a mistake there - because while I was watching them they were unwrapping the weapons and I saw ammunition like hand grenades and bazookas. I said if these people are not watching me I'm going to take the hand grenades and hit them hard. But unfortunately because my eyes were just focusing on those hand grenades, one of the police shouted to the others, 'take that man away from there!' They didn't want me near the weapons, and they took me away.

They tried to ask me how I was moving recruits and arms. I said no, I don't know, go to hell! Well, of course they were beating me, my stomach was very sore and I had to have an operation.

In the hospital the soldiers and police were guarding me, only Whites now, no more Blacks and Coloureds

I was in pain all the time. My legs and hands were chained to the bed. They used to escort me to the toilet.

I went to court and was sentenced. Eighteen of us were taken to Robben Island at the same time – 14 from MK and 4 from APLA. On the way to Robben Island the group appointed me as the chief. We arrived at Kroonstad. We were hungry and demanded something to eat.

Then they went to get the Boer in charge who spoke nonsense. Our group looked at me and said you're in charge, you'll tell us what to do. I said no, be

quiet. These soldiers have brought us here, they must go and buy us food. While they are going to buy us food, we are going to make noise purposely. That Boer boy who was calling us 'bloody kaffirs', we'll get him.

I said when he comes back we are going to make so that he must come to us. When he gets in the middle of us we are going to deal with him. He just fell into our trap. When he was just in the middle, we started hitting him.

Luckily for him, the others came quickly and pushed us away. And that Boer never came near to us after that until we got to Robben Island.

When comrade Ernest asked you to bring arms into the country, did he tell you that he was part of a special unit in MK called Special Ops?

Yes.

Did he tell you what the specific role of Special Ops was as distinct from other MK units?

He just summarised – and said for Special Ops we must train people in the country and we must also take people to them so he can train them and they must come back to the country. I must assist them with arms. We must attack police stations and economic places. I must supervise the comrades.

Did you take part in any specific operations for Special Ops?

No, I advised the comrades on targets and what to do. Those that were in trouble, I moved them to other places and took some outside the country so they won't get caught by the Boers.

Were their targets always the police and security people?

Yes.

Did they hit any economic targets?

No.

Did you ever meet the woman who sold you out, after you got released from Robben Island?

I never met her, but my wife did because my father-in-law passed away while I was in prison and that lady went to the funeral. She just talked nonsense that I

made blunders and that's how I got caught. But the Boers built a bottle store for her in Botswana and stocked it a lot because she got me arrested.

So she's never apologised for what she did to you?

No, she never. She died some years ago.