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MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

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Farouk, tell me a bit about your family background, about your parents and siblings and if they had any influence on you politically?

My parents were both born in India. My father came here in the first half of the last century when he was about nine or so and my mother came in about 1952 with her parents when she was probably around seven or eight. My mother is the second of nine siblings and she looked after her siblings. It was my father's second marriage. A twenty year age gap. It was an arranged marriage.

We lived in Fietas (Fordsburg), in a warehouse at a back of a place called Hans Store. There was a bathroom and a kitchen on the ground floor, and we stayed upstairs with a communal toilet shared by the workers. We lived in 14th Street, which was a hive of activity. Both my mom and dad come from very humble beginnings. Neither of them went to school. My father was a trader selling combs, hairsprays and anything you could get on the black market to sell on the streets.

So, I came from a very simple working class family.

I'm the eldest and after my sister, Mariam, and my brother, Ebrahim, about 10 years later, we had a laat lammetjie (a late baby) of the family, Nadia.

Did your parents in any way influence you to become socially and politically aware?

I think their entire struggle was trying to find food and bread and get us to school. But I come from a family that was politically conscientised quite early in their student days. Many of them were influenced by politics in the '70's. My

uncle, Goolam Aboobaker (ANC veteran activist), whom you probably know, was on Salisbury Island, which was later replaced by UDW (University of Durban Westville). Through him we opened our eyes to politics in the most simple form.

Goolam used to give us books as presents – always the alternative stuff. He encouraged the right kind of thinking and exposed us to things that typically an Indian family would not be exposed to.

Is there any particular moment or event that contributed significantly to your political awareness or was it an incremental awareness mainly through reading political literature and engaging with your uncle Goolam?

I was in Durban in the '80's during the student boycotts – I think that was my sharpest political awakening. I was at UDW – and that was quite an active period. I got involved in youth movements, the civics, NIC (Natal Indian Congress) activities in Durban.

I had to go back to Joburg and deal with the realities of living a normal life and paying your way through and supporting the family, etc. I was also involved with the Lenasia Youth League.

You know, I was like a rebel from an early age, and I think that opened up a whole set of events that just allowed one to get more deeply involved in student politics at the time.

When did you first meet Iqbal Mohammed Shaik and what were the circumstances?

Iqbal and I know one another from our Fietas days. My father used to run a little store on 14th street. Igs (Iqbal) and his family used to run a dairy shop. So, I knew Igs and his family from then. I used to move between Joburg and Durban a lot because my mom was from Durban and my dad from Joburg. I schooled both in Durban and Joburg. I finished my university education at Durban-Westville. Sixty percent of my life was being on boycotts, so it was quite an interesting phase. I was there from 1980 to around '86.

And to cut a long story short, Igs and I reconnected back in Joburg in the late '80's. And then in 1989 he approached me to join him in his MK activities. He had been checking me out for a while. I mean, we always knew one another, we had the same social friends, we used to drink, party, do the everyday boy's

stuff together. And he knew my political history. And we also knew where we stood.

So, to cut a long story short, I had a little place in an area called Zakariyya Park. I was living on my own then, had a relatively okay job, and Igs was probably checking me out for more than six months to a year. And then he approached me and asked me if I would like to get involved. I said, yes, and he says 'well, this is serious stuff, so if you do, here's the deal.'

And I said, okay, Igs, ja, I'll think about it. And a week later he came to my place with a bag full of arms, and he said 'this is the real thing'. He showed me how to dismantle an AK and he had a couple of other things, limpets and a few grenades and he said 'this is it, and if you're in, there's no turning back, here's what you need to do so get some basic arms training'. I signed up for a school in Lens to learn how to use a hand revolver and I went for eight to ten lessons - and then lo and behold we made our first trip to Botswana!....

Iqbal had moved from his MK Special Ops role to serving in Ordnance when you reconnected with him. So, you continued after the ANC's unbanning?...

The early '90s were a tricky period, things could have gone either way. There was a bigger push to get more involved in the armed struggle as there was no real certainty that the Boere then would give in or not.

What else did Iqbal say to you to win you over?

His brief was very simple. He didn't share any information. He just said, 'okay, I'm operating as a one-man band. I've been doing it for a long time. I'm not going to share with you the details because you don't need to know; and if we get involved, I trust you, you trust me. We know how the game works. You're not a kid. And here's what you are signing up for.' And it was very clear because at that point, the mass movement was only doing so much as it could, it didn't push so-called Indian comrades to go a level deeper. And we said, okay, we're in it for the long haul.

Igs and I knew one another for years so it was not as if we would doubt one another. As I said, we had similar interests, we used to hike, drink, party together.

He was quite a lone operator and he kept actively out of the populace politics, so to speak.

Why did you decide almost immediately Iqbal approached you, that you were in? Shouldn't you have given yourself more time to think it over? After all, joining the armed struggle, with its huge risks, is quite a big step....

No, I was thinking about it for a long time. I knew a lot of people who were involved. I supported on the odd occasion on the fringes. Do you remember Lenny Naidoo, Richard Vallihu and David Madurai? When they tried to get out of the country they stayed at my place in Joburg. I had known people that were involved in the armed struggle, but not intimately. I had actually no idea at the time how deeply involved Igs was, and when he showed me the real stuff I said, well, okay, there's no turning back here. It was the right thing to do. It was not something that we had a huge philosophical debate about.

I think we were pretty cool because nobody would have suspected that we were involved in the armed struggle as long as we kept to simple protocols.

Did you discuss it at all with anybody else?

No.

Were you married at the time or in a stable relationship? Did you have children?

I was single. No children.

With the ANC unbanned, did you raise with Igs what was the point of continuing to distribute arms? The ANC had suspended the armed struggle.

No, because we knew it was going to be a tricky transition. We had a very good sense that the hand we were dealt with meant that there was never going to be open war at the borders; it would be clandestine activity. And at the time, the machinery was not in our hands and we knew the negotiations would go one of two ways. And it was a messy period, those first four years from 1990. And the advice that we got is that we'll plan for both options – negotiations and a back-up through arms.

At the time that Iqbal approached you, were you in a full-time job?

My first job. I worked as an accountant for a company in the East Rand, I don't want to go into that detail, and I had a little car and I had a little place. I had my own income, I was supporting my family, and I was paying for my sister's

tuition. One of the things Igs said was that we need a garage not necessarily to store stuff, but to use as a staging point, and so I built a double-garage exactly knowing what we were going to do with it. So, my place was the staging point, his place was where we had the BLBs, and he had a very nice place down the road in Kibler Park which was literally two to three kilometers from me. We did all of this on our own bat, self-funded.

You got no funding for that?

No.

After you agreed to join Iqbal did you get any training?

I'm a football fanatic and in 1990 I went for the World Cup in Italy. The intent was for me to get to Italy legitimately, and then make contact with one of Rashid's contacts for me to go for training. However, things at home had moved so rapidly and I could not get hold of the contact person I constantly phoned, and there was no comeback. I had memorised the number, I think it was a London number.

What happens when you go to Botswana?

During the first trip to Botswana, we met Rashid. I had actually no idea where and how Rashid sat in the MK structures. I knew of him, heard of him, but in those days you don't ask questions, you just get on with the stuff, and you keep it as simple as possible.

I was surprised about Rashid. Firstly, the humility, the level of respect he showed, and he was an amazingly smart human being, and he was exceptionally vigilant. The first time we went to Botswana we were blindfolded, we didn't know where we were, we just had to follow all the security protocols.

Rashid is a very simple guy. I remember the only thing he asked me was to bring him a tawa (an aluminium pan) for his rotis on our next visit.

He had no airs and graces and we were just down to business. It was two nights maximum, and a whole lot of things to remember, what are the instructions, where we're going to do things, how do we follow them through, what would be the modus operandi on the logistics. You don't ask too many questions. And Igs and I had a very good understanding about what we chose to remember and what we chose not to remember. Generally, we never wrote things down.

What exactly did you do in ordnance?

So, this was the gig. The story was quite simple. All of our pick-up points were somewhere in Fordsburg. At that time, we were managing roughly one ton of arms in the country on a VW Kombi fully loaded. We knew Fordsburg as it was where we grew up. The Kombi would be parked there. There were clear markers, such as bumper stickers or markers on the rear view mirror, and we knew all of the touch points and that the keys would be on the right hand side or the left hand side under the mat. Yes Igs used to do an initial recon (reconnaissance) and so we used to follow a set route. He used to go and do the pre-check and then from there we had a little piece – a Makarov – on us in case anything happened.

I used to pick up the Kombi, drive it from Fordsburg to Zakariyya Park to my garage, park it, keep it there until about eleven or twelve at night. And then I would take it to his place in Kibler Park, and we would unpack the stuff in his garage. We would never use any electronic drill; we used a hand drill to remove all the boxes. It probably would have been fifteen to twenty at a time. After unpacking them, Igs used to take the Kombi back to the same place in Fordsburg. We were on average doing one drop a month, and then as things heated up, we were doing probably two drops a month.

In addition, we did maybe four or five DLBs in all, in and around the Lenasia and the Potch areas; mainly supporting, I would think, SDU units in Soweto. We maybe did about an additional four or five around the Potch area, not far from Lenasia. We would always do an initial recon. I mean Igs was very thorough. We would never ever do a pick-up without a first recon and follow a set route - and that was the modus operandi.

What did the pre-pick-up recon entail?

He would drive the route that we were going to take from home to the pick-up point; he would check about roadblocks and any other potential hazards. I would come from work. I would meet him, he would take my car. He would already have done the pre-check, parked his car somewhere necessary. We would always make sure if the drop was at two o'clock, we would go there at two thirty, so it gave thirty minutes grace. We knew we had exactly an hour to get it to my place. I would keep it there; at about eleven at night, we'd prepare to take it to his place. He or I would do a pre-run drive to his place, drive back, and if everything was clear, take the Kombi through. The first two or three times you're nervous but after that it worked like clockwork. We had a very good routine.

We would do a route recon in the morning and do the same route again in the afternoon because things change, a roadblock could pitch up. We do it at eight in the morning but there could be a roadblock at twelve. He would check the route out in the morning, I'd be at work. Boom. He'd give me a clear call, okay, great. I'd meet him in Fordsburg.

So, he'd phone you at your workplace?

Yes. We had an understanding. We didn't have cellphones then, so we knew exactly when to call. We just stuck to a routine. And then an hour before I would pick up, he would do the route again just to ensure that there were no roadblocks or any potential hazards. And he would follow me at a safe distance. Once I would put the Kombi into the garage, he'd go back to work. He had a little fish shop in Eldorado Park.

All clear – and that night I would leave home at eleven so he would know at eleven fifteen I would be at his place and then we work from eleven fifteen or around twelve until three or four in the morning unpacking the boxes. We were very clear about not creating any unnecessary noise. I mean, he had a pretty cool place.

We would remove all of the steel plates and we'd dug a hole in his garage. We had a little dugout area, what we would call a wine cellar and that place was never ever less than three to four tons full of materiel.

Did this materiel come from outside through the Safari truck? (This refers to MK's use of a safari truck to bring tourists into South Africa as a means of smuggling in arms and explosives hidden in a dead letter box at the bottom of the truck. A documentary on this, The Secret Safari, can be seen on <http://youtu.be./foqURw31gmc>)

I would think so. We knew as much as we needed to know. My guess is, yes, because the quantities that were coming in were phenomenal. We were shocked actually, flipping shocked. We were not walking around with two or three toy pistols. At a time, we had maybe two hundred grenades, maybe two hundred limpets. I mean, a lot of stuff.

It was just phenomenal also how the pieces of the logistics worked from the outside into the country. The important thing is that wherever we were, we blended. Whichever routes we used, we were absolutely familiar with them. And we decided on Fordsburg because we knew if there was anything happening in Fordsburg we'd be the first to recognise if things were not

normal. So, we worked to our strengths and then we did the BLBs in areas we were familiar with, around Lenasia or close to the Soweto area.

We used to go on hikes and work out where we're going to place things. And maybe three nights before or the night before we'd figure out the ideal place. Then we'd draw the maps. Then on the day of the DLB and during the night we'd usually do the route before we took the stuff in order to check that it was clear.

Igs had a Peugeot that was pretty loaded when we needed to. And we would do the BLBs from eleven or twelve until about three or four in the morning, as I said. Maps are ready. Bang. And then from then on how he communicated with Rashid was Iqbal's baby. So, even between the two of us we had a very clear understanding - here's what you know and rest you didn't really need to know. The rest of it is what Igs would do. And we never ever crossed sides on that.

Did you ever lose a drop?

No, never.

You speak of this in such a matter-of-fact manner, as if it was an ordinary thing to do, as if you were distributing groceries. All the time you were doing this, did you not have any sense of anxiety or fear?

Oh yes, every time. You would be naïve not to. About 30 years later it's hard to remember this. There was always an adrenalin rush. The first thing was to recognise the Kombi. Right, great, now we know which one. You don't even want to remember the registration number, but you know it's mostly the same one. The bumper stickers used to change. And when you see the bumper sticker you breathe a sigh of relief - Man, this is the right one. Then you'd look out for the marker on the rear view mirror. Yes, that's the same monkey hanging there.

And it was our protocol that the moment you get in, you lift it off, and then when you finished with the Kombi, you put the marker back, because when it's not there you know it's trouble. If it's on, then it's clear. So, we had very clear indicators. I mean, Rashid was really good at walking us through that detail. And it's a very important detail because in six months or so you won't remember all the details as you're not writing them down.

So, there's a serious adrenaline rush, but after the first one it, honestly, becomes a walk in the park because we were smart, confident, humble; we were not arrogant and we were not talkers. And I used to go home and have a beer after that - job well done, great, when's the next one coming? And Igs

and I – when we were with our friends – they had absolutely no idea what we were up to.

I think planting the DLBs in the ground was much tougher.

Do you have any idea where the arms might have gone to?

We did three arm cache drops in a month. We'd dig a hole, place it in, draw the map and then get it across to Rashid.

I have a strong idea where it went to because we could follow the incidents. We knew where it was happening.

We knew also about the Prakash Napier incident (Prakash Napier and Yusuf Akhalwaya of MK died when a limpet mine apparently exploded prematurely). It's hard to say what really happened there. Maybe it was human error? Or maybe the limpets were tampered with? Or maybe they didn't give themselves enough time after they pulled the ignition on the limpet? Whatever it was, it was very unfortunate. Other comrades also had this bad experience.

I also know that the SDU's (Self-Defence Units) used a lot of our stuff because of the quantities that we were moving. We had different kinds of logistics drops with different combinations of materiel – for example, different numbers of AK's, limpets and grenades. Igs knew more about that. My role was just to make sure we got it to a particular point. If we got the instruction to do three or four BLBs in and around a certain area, we just did it.

So, when do you stop doing this?

I was actively involved from 1990 to 1994 and then things were starting to shift and the balance was starting to look better. And then I got married in 1994 and my life turned to a different path because at that point there was no need for active involvement, we were in a democracy.



Farouk Farista, recently

Did you not want to join the SANDF or go elsewhere into the state?

No. I don't know how to answer the question really because I was in a regular job. I didn't do this for any stripes. I didn't do it for any kudos. I did it out of personal conviction. It was something that Igs and I always talked about.

But you could also have wanted to go into the state to help consolidate the new democracy?

Understandably, but then I was married, I had everyday family and work issues to deal with, and, you know, life took a different turn. I mean in retrospect yes, maybe; my life would've been different, but I just got caught in normal day-to-day living.

Did you know that Iqbal had been in the Dolphin Unit of Special Ops which was a specific unit in MK with a specific role before he became part of Ordnance? That he had done about 35 operations for Special Ops?

No, but I had sound bites of some of what he did, but I think we were disciplined enough not to ask because, I mean, when you're in that kind of work you never know how long you're going to last. You have no idea how much will it compromise the guy or not if he chose to tell you, but I had known enough.

I'd figured out that he had been involved in the Krugersdorp incident, without him telling me. He said he used to go to Krugersdorp. Okay – but why would you be going to Krugersdorp, I thought? And I worked out he'd been out of the country many times, but I was reluctant to ask a lot of questions. I didn't want to know the answers also because if I would've pushed him, then we could've gone down another path and he could have said, hey, we're not going to do any of that stuff, this is all you need to know, no more. There were security considerations – and I didn't need to know what I didn't.

Do you think in the late '80's we were in a semi-insurrectionary or insurrectionary phase or not?

After the formation of the UDF (United Democratic Front) there was really a lot of stuff happening across the country; it was relatively on fire. I think although the underground structures were not ready for that kind of insurrectionary move, I also knew that a key part of why we had to keep going was the huge quantities that were being brought in. When I saw the amount of stuff that was coming through I had a reasonably good idea that this could support a hundred units out there. It was fifty-fifty – we needed the mass movement together with the armed units to be operating in tandem, and the struggle could've gone either way.

Do you think if the armed struggle had been escalated before entering into negotiations, we might have got a more transformative project post-1994?

That's the million dollar question, hey. It's hard to say. I mean we had to assess a lot in terms of the balance of strength and were we able to sustain the struggle? Would we be able to ensure that there were not too many casualties? The Boere had the arms and the infrastructure. You only have to look at what they did in Durban with Inkatha and supporting the train massacres, etc. Yes, maybe if you sustained it for a bit longer, you could have got a better outcome. Sunset clauses could've been better negotiated. But, overall, having a peaceful resolution was a lot better.

If you knew then what the ANC and country would turn out to be now, would you still have taken part in the armed struggle?

I mean what we did at that time was right. There was no questioning that. We knew the risks associated with it and we also knew that the longer we survived the better. I mean we thought we'd go on for still much longer.

I didn't really think 1994 was going to come so soon. We thought we would go on through the '90's, and maybe after that if you could survive for five to ten years of this, we'd have maybe a different outcome. But quite honestly South Africa right now is at a tipping point. I mean one would have never expected us to be in this place. We thought we would have stronger social development and then we would move towards a socialist country and that we would provide good government - but you have an ANC that doesn't really care for the people. We have lost our way.

Do you see yourself as a socialist?

Yes, I have socialist principles, driven by the humanitarian side, I wouldn't say that I'm like an out-and-out socialist, but I mean the principles around being humane is what drives most people. And I think, yes, if we just stuck to that and did some of the things that we committed to basically in the Freedom Charter and tried to hold it together, we'd have been okay. The first five years, democratic government was okay, but after that we lost our way big time.

You are very close to Iqbal, so this may be difficult for you – but what do you see as his strengths and weaknesses? Why do you think he managed to do what he did?

Actually, many people underestimate Igs. I know him because I'm a lot like him. As I said, we come from the same community, we're streetwise kids, we grew up on the streets and we knew how to survive. I think Igs was a rebel from a very early age.

Igs needed an avenue. He got tired of the everyday blah blah mass movement stuff. He wanted to get involved a lot deeper and there was no avenue. But I also think that to have the ability to do what he did and survive, it takes a remarkable human being. He is my comrade, he is my bra, he is my good friend.

He was deliberate, diligent. For a person to survive on his own and do all of that takes an incredible amount of resilience and tenacity. And I think when I came in, it was the right time because it was just too much for him. When I came in, we really pushed it. What would have taken him six months to a year, we were doing in a month. We could do it every week, by the way. We were a great team. We had like a twenty year history before we worked on this.

And what I like most about him is that he knew how to play it and he was very smart about not exposing himself and not blowing his trumpet and taking credit for things. But I just think that Igs could have done a lot more if he was engaged politically with the guys, but you know politics in the Indian community at the time, if you're not the flavour of the month, you're not.

If you ask me, Igs had that X-factor.

I think Igs had a modus operandi that he really created for himself. He thought through every single thing with a level of detail that I found quite incredible. He never took blind chances. He always had a cover story for himself, and as a guerilla operator I don't think you'd easily find a comrade with that level of finesse and ability to connect with people. And I think he knew for a long time that he wanted to get involved in the armed struggle. For about ten years he was thinking about it and when he went in, I think Rashid had a big influence in terms of coaching him.

I think Chacha (Mohammed Ismail, who was in the Dolphin Unit of Special Ops with Iqbal Shaik) had a space in time with Igs and I think if he'd stuck with Chacha longer, it wouldn't have worked out, and he was looking for somebody like me for a long time. And when he found me he grabbed me. He didn't give me much of a chance really. He just said 'are you in?' I said yes. Then next thing he's at my house with a flipping arms cache, and he said, 'right, that's it, we're in now, we're still great.' I said, ya, we're in. He said 'you turning back?' No, no. 'Are you sure?' And then we just did it. He said, 'here's the deal, you come to my place, I'll show you what I've got, and Tuesday we're picking up first load. That's it. There's no rocket science to this.'

Why did it take him so long to find you after drifting away from Chacha?

I was in Durban then. He was in Joburg. He was then at ML Sultan, I was at UDW. And then our paths just met up in Lens only later.

I got back to Joburg in about '86 or '87. From the moment I started working I got my own place. Igs was sussing (checking) me out. 'Is he responsible? Can he pay his rent? Would he do his stuff? Right, okay, this guy can manage life, good. Now I'm sure we'll make it happen.'

I met Rashid twice and I think Rashid was waiting for a guy like Igs for a very long time.

I think we could have continued with moving the stuff for another ten years. We would not have got caught, believe me, it would have been very difficult to catch us out, honestly, because we were very quiet about what we did. We used to sit with the boys, have a Black Label, relax, smoke an odd joint. We were just the everyday riffraff but politically we were connected. People thought we were like the local drunkards. Igs and I used to have a Black Label after doing a drop.

Up to today, if I drive around and I'm drinking I have a toppie (Muslim skull cap), I don't ever get stopped. If I'm stopped, its salaams, you know, my religion forbids me to drink...

Did you apply for a Special Pension?

No, look, I just did what I did because I had to; it was the right thing; and when it was over, I wanted to move on. I was at a certain phase of my life, I had a very good job, and I just went with the flow. I got stuck in that.

Igs and I just went apart in the 80s and then we just reconnected, and after 1994 we just went separate like.

Are you're still an accountant?

No, right now I'm sort of between jobs, consulting, doing the odd thing.

Does your wife or any other family member or friend, apart from Iqbal, know the role you played?

Not in the level of detail I'm sharing with you now. I didn't really share much with my wife and nothing with my children.

Iqbal refers to what might be called an alternative or delinquent culture that he was a part of. You seem also to be part of this? In a way, it's what also binds you?

Yes, I mean, we were not your regular what I would call Muslim boys. I have friends across the colour spectrum. The '80's was the best time to be around - and you may call it a quasi-bohemian culture, one in which people would just do whatever they felt like, and you would chose to be in company with whoever you want, and ninety percent of my friends are non-Muslims.

Like Iqbal, you are keen on hiking?

Yes, in fact Iqbal, his brother and I went in the late '80's or early '90's on a hike from Port Edward to Port St Johns. Iqbal was one of the guys who started the boys' hiking club, and we were all into it and we enjoyed going to the Drakensburg and elsewhere. And, as I said, on many of our hikes in and around Lens we would find places to look out for DLBs. So, we found these places the real way.