

MK Special Operations Unit Project

Interviews

Peter-Paul Ngwenya

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Johannesburg (telephonically)

Comrade Peter-Paul, will you tell us a bit about your personal background? Did your parents or siblings influence you politically? Or your friends or neighbours or anybody else?

My full name is Sibusiso Peter-Paul Ngwenya. I was born in Umlazi, Durban on 3 September 1953 and my schooling took place all over KZN. I started in Umlazi. I went to boarding school in the South Coast near Port Shepstone and then to Inkamana High School in Vryheid. It was a Catholic school. In a way, I must say that is where I first became politically aware. All along I knew that the Whites were treated differently from us, but I sort of accepted that that was how it was meant to be. I remember that I never saw many Whites unless one went with one's parents to the city centre of Durban. My first encounter with a White person was the Catholic priest, Condor. To me, this man was the kindest man ever.

Although he was English, he tried to speak our language. I was an altar boy. So I really had quite a good relationship with him. Which in a way explains why it was easier for me to join the ANC rather than the PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) because as far as the ANC was concerned, all people were human beings and it was a non-racial organisation. Next to our township there's Isipingo, and the shops that serviced us then all belonged to Indians, who were a different racial group to us and they treated us very well. They used to give our parents credit, and if you had a cheque, you could go to them with it and they would accept it. Now I'm trying to explain maybe why I was persuaded to work with the ANC rather than any other party that was for Africans only.

Then when I went to Inkamana High School, that's where, really, I became aware. We were taught by Germans. And all those teachers had been affected in one way or another by the Second World War. I also studied history at Inkamana and what happened in Germany was taught with passion to us. I learned one thing – that no system that is evil will last forever.

I had known that there was a person called Nelson Mandela who was a troublemaker whom the police were searching for. We had heard that in public places written in Zulu there were messages that whoever has seen this man, please report to the police. Fortunately for me at Inkamana my best friend was Winnie Mandela's cousin. Winnie Mandela's uncle was this person's father, and, in fact, when Nelson Mandela and Winnie got married the wedding happened at their house, 7012



Orlando West. So, I got first-hand information about this gentleman (Mandela) who had been described as an evil person. I got really interested in politics. A comrade you might know, Obadi (Montso Mokgabudi) was my senior at the school. Mdu Guma was also my senior at school. Both Mdu Guma and Obadi were killed in the Matola raid. So it was at that school that I had become aware that this apartheid system is evil and it must be fought, but still I didn't join any political party because at that time there was nothing. And I couldn't do anything on my own.

Peter-Paul Ngwenya in his youth.

I moved then to the University of Fort Hare, where I was recruited into politics by Mzukisi Skweyiya. He was a South African bantam boxing champion. He left the country and I think he was killed in Lesotho.

Then my two younger brothers left the country in 1980-81. I don't know if you know George Sithole? He assisted them to leave. When Comrade George was arrested and then charged, my brothers' names were in the charge sheet for being among those he arranged to leave the country to join the ANC.

I moved to live in Johannesburg with an uncle who didn't have kids. So now, after Fort Hare, I was living in Johannesburg and I worked for IBM. I remember I felt very guilty when Barbara Hogan was sent to jail for 10 years. I said to myself here is a White woman who doesn't have to lift a finger, she was living comfortably in South Africa, and yet she chose to join this struggle for our own liberation. And then I felt I needed to do something myself so I travelled to Botswana under the guise that I was trying to find out where my brothers went. I went to the ANC office and met a few people there, some of whom are now dead. I introduced myself and was sent to Dukwe camp because that's where my brothers had been.

Your brothers' names?

Mthokozisi and Patrick Bonga. When I got to Dukwe my brothers had left. Mthokozisi died. We're in the process of repatriating his remains from Tanzania and my other brother is back in the country. I found Guy Malamba's brother there at Dukwe. So, in a way I said to them I am available to do whatever I can do – I am based in the country so perhaps that would be where to start because nobody would suspect me of doing anything. Once I joined the ANC, I was asked not to associate myself with all these political parties like the UDF (United Democratic Front) and them. I was asked to operate under the ANC. I would go to Botswana during my holidays and I would be asked sometimes by the ANC if I would receive people. I was trained also.

What was your training?

I was trained in handling firearms, grenades and limpet mines. Sometime in 1985 I received a message that there were people who were going to come in and I needed to take care of them.

Who sent you that message?

It was somebody called Joe. He ended up on Robben Island. His real name might have been George. The comrades used different MK names at different times in different countries.

Anyway, that's how then I received Guy (Malamba), Abraham (Lentsoane) and Lux. Lux was the Commander and I found a place for them in Winterveld in Pretoria. Then I had to travel to Botswana to get instructions for them. That's where I met (Ernest) Pule, known as Oupa and Lester Dumakude, who then I referred to as Chris. I also met somebody and talked to him without me meeting him face-to-face. It was in a house and he spoke to me from behind a door so I didn't see his face. My suspicion is that it was Rashid I was speaking with.

And during my police interrogation I was grilled about meeting Rashid and they showed me photos – but these were not of Rashid, whom I later saw.

Was it Barry Gilder?

You know, they confused Rashid with Barry Gilder. He's a White guy. When I finally met Rashid, I did mention to him that I was punished for you.

So what did he say?

He laughed about it (laughter).

Anyway, in 1985 when I was in Botswana, we discussed the mission of shooting down aircraft carrying SADF officers who were going to Namibia to fight the apartheid war there. These SADF soldiers used both the Waterkloof and the Swartkop airports. I think our main target was going to be Swartkop. When I was called back to Botswana in December 1985 I was told that, 'Look, we've had to postpone the operation which was going to happen round about before Christmas'. They said to me, 'These comrades have been in the country for far too long and we don't want them to get frustrated and feel they were brought into the country just to sit and do nothing. So, we are going to be giving you materiel for another mission which will send the message that MK is still around. You must decide what targets to hit and we'll give you a letter to make this clear to the comrades in the country'.

They gave me this letter, but they said that they were going to send somebody else with all the materiel for the new operation – 'You are not going to take it yourself'. I agreed. Then I went back to where I was based to wait for further instructions. Then they came and said to me, 'Look, this person who we are going to be using to send the materiel across has asked to meet you first because she doesn't want to be fooled when she gets to South Africa only to hand the materiel to an informer'. Then I agreed, and met with her, but obviously I gave her a different name for me. I think I said to her I'm Mike. I can't remember the surname but it was a Sotho name. We agreed I was going to drive back to Johannesburg and she would follow after that.

Did this woman give you her name?

Yes, she did give me her name...So I travelled back to South Africa myself and then I was expecting her the following morning. I had given her a telephone number of a person I know. I went to him and said somebody's going to call you and ask for Mike. That's a call for me.

She called and said she's in South Africa. She's past Zeerust; she's worried the traffic is too heavy; she's not familiar with driving in South Africa, and can we meet her halfway? I said where? Halfway she dropped the phone. Then when she called again, she said she'd reached Randfontein and somebody was helping her to drive. Where can she meet me? I asked the person she was with, does he know the West Rand well? We agreed then to meet at the Roodepoort railway station. When I got there, she was with this gentleman, and he was also going to Johannesburg.

I took delivery of the vehicle she brought and parked it at a house in Meadowlands. I then went to book her into a hotel in Hillbrow, the Johannesburger. We dropped off the gentleman with her at some hostel where he was staying. The lady asked me what exactly my training was like, where did I train and all of that, and I should have smelled a rat but I didn't. I just said to her, look, I'm just working for the ANC, I don't have any training. She asked me if I could come to visit her at night, but I said I wouldn't have the time because I have a lot of work to do. I must strip this vehicle and take out all the materiel and bury it. Cut a long story short, I stripped the vehicle, took out the materiel, and hid it. As I was driving away, the police pounced on me.

Was that at your uncle's place?

Correct. Whenever I was doing ANC work, I would always be not going on my own. I would drive with a woman sometimes or with a child so that nobody suspects I'm up to no good. It would be different women at times. The woman who came most of the time was Bongiwe, Wilton Mkwayi's daughter-in-law. So I was with her and they arrested her as well. The police took us to Protea police station and then they took me back to where I had buried the materiel. They wanted to know how many people were in that house. I told them, and they took me there. Then they got my wife to come and see me. They woke her up at night. I managed to pass a message to her that you must tell the doctor whom I was supposed to meet that this has happened and I won't be able to meet him. This doctor was taking care of Lux and them. I knew that once he received the message, he would notify the comrades to leave.

But I think there was a delay in relaying messages. Of course, I didn't disclose anything about Guy, Abraham and Lux. I just gave them a story that I got involved because my brother had died in the exile and I was investigating this and then I was asked by the ANC to help and then they give me this materiel. I really have no clue what it was going to be used for. I was told somebody was going to call me and I must hand the materiel to them. So for a while, they believed the story, so they took me to the magistrate to make that confession, which I did. Then I think two weeks later they came back and said 'No, you've been giving us a shit story here,' and then,

'You think we don't know about all those people who've been arrested in Pretoria? You were going to shoot down a plane'.

They released Bongiwe after a few days but they re-arrested her when they realised that we had used her to go and check out Swartkop (military air base). We took her there and we disabled the car. We said 'You must wait here and we're going to look'. Because once you park the car there the authorities would come to say 'move'. Bongiwe used to visit Robben Island herself to see Comrade Wilton, so the police said she knows something. They tried to use her as a state witness in our case but she refused and she was sentenced to three years.

The lady from Botswana had also been arrested previously. Her story was that the ANC had used her before. But then the authorities realised that she's of no use to them in jail, so they released her back to the ANC, let the ANC use her, we will also use her. So, they told her she must report to them on the ANC. That's how I also went through the trap of this Botswana lady. Anyway, when she went back to the ANC, they interrogated her and they were not convinced by her. They were very suspicious of her and decided not to use her, but then later, when they were struggling to get people to assist them, they went back to her...

Anyway, Guy, Abraham and I were all sentenced to 15 years on Robben Island

Which year did you get released?

I was released on 16 of April 1991. The deadline for release of all prisoners was 30 April. We were welcomed by Chris Hani on our release. And two years later he was killed.

Were you aware at the time you were active that you were part of a specific unit within MK – the Special Ops unit?

At that stage I was not aware. In fact, the first people who told me about it was the police. And they put an album before me in which there were big photos. This included Chris, Pule, and then there was this guy they referred to as Rashid and in the end, they showed me the whole album with everyone else.

How did they get to know about Abraham and Guy?

I had found a place for them to stay in Soshanguve but then I had said to them it's not safe for all of you to be in one place. So they left Abraham there and Guy and Lux went to live somewhere else. I didn't know where. And remember at that time things were really hotting up, and on the radio people were regularly told who to look for in terms of identifying who are terrorists, as they used to call us. They said sometimes these people will come and they'll hire a room from you. They will tell you they are working, but you will not know where.

Sometimes Abraham would stay indoors without leaving the whole day. The woman who owned the house one day saw him polishing a gun when she peeped through the window. People were promised money if they betray ANC people. And she went to the

police, and they came and arrested Abraham. Although the message that I'd been arrested didn't reach Abraham, it reached Pule. Now the problem was how to reach those guys in Soshanguve?

The police had surrounded the house where Abraham was staying. The owner of the house told the police that other people were living with Abraham. So, after arresting Abraham, I think two of the police stayed in the house. Now with me not coming back at the time I was expected, Lux and Guy started to get worried that there was something wrong. So Lux, who was the Commander, asked Guy to go and check with Abraham. When Guy got to the house where Abraham was staying, the police arrested him. The police interrogated Guy and Abraham separately. There was no way my name wasn't going to come up.

The police from Pretoria phoned Johannesburg and said arrest anybody called Peter that drives such a car and the police said, 'No, we have someone like that here'. They then sent a photo to the Pretoria police of me... There's a guy, Mike who's doing a thesis on the armed struggle. He has access to all the records. That's how I got to know the whole story. I must introduce you to him.

I can safely say here that apart from the leak from Botswana from this woman, nobody betrayed us inside the country. When I was arrested two other comrades were arrested, his MK name was Brian and the other was, Swazi Dlodlo, but I've forgotten his MK name. We were all kept at Protea detention centre. Swazi's co-accused, Brian became an *Askari* (defected to the apartheid security forces) and I think he was asked to try and recruit me to be one too. He was in a cell next to me. Then Jeff Hadebe was brought to Protea. I knew Jeff and I bumped into him in the passage and greeted him with excitement. And when these people were giving us food, I said to them you must give Jeff my regards.

So, the police realised that I knew Jeff and they moved me to a cell next to him so that they could listen to what we were talking about. Then they moved this other guy who turned out to be an *Askari* to a cell next to Jeff to listen to what we were saying. He was a smoker. Both Jeff and I were not smokers and we picked up that there was somebody next to us who was smoking. Jeff asked me, 'Are you smoking?' I said, no. Then this guy said, 'No comrades, it's me. I'm smoking.' He said he's so and so. That's when I realised that they had moved him. He was sent to the trial of Terror Lekota to testify against the comrades. That is the one person I can safely say became a turncoat.

When I was released in 1991, I went to the ANC Shell Office and the other ANC office next to Westgate. I said I am back – what should I do? I met Zola Skweyiya and



Wilton Mkwayi (ANC leaders) and they said to me, 'The ANC can't use all of you. Some of you, especially those who obtained qualifications while in jail, we want you to go to the private sector'. Already BP, Engen and I think it was an insurance company had come over to Robben Island. (UDF leader) Trevor Manuel had told these companies that there

are people on Robben Island who have been studying, see if you can employ them, it can be your contribution to democracy. I was interviewed by BP, Engen and an insurance company. I was hired by Engen and I worked for them. About 10 of us were employed by these companies. Round about 1995 Mandela set up this Makana Trust with Ahmed Kathrada. I became a trustee of that with Ahmed Kathrada and Soto Ndukwana. In the end we formed a commercial vehicle out of this and I was asked to run it and am still doing that today.

Peter-Paul Ngwenya in
later years

In the '80s you worked for IBM. What was your role there? I don't think that, apart from in low skilled jobs, there were many Black people employed there?

Yes, I was one of the first computer programmers trained there.

How come you got the job? What was your educational background then?

At the University of Fort Hare I had an IBM scholarship.

Why would IBM give you a scholarship?

Well, they were under pressure with the Sullivan Code, which required American companies operating in South Africa to employ Blacks. In positions at all levels, they needed to have Black, Indian and Coloured people. There was no institution that was training people as computer programmers or even as computer operators. IBM took me in. I did a BCom degree. One of the courses I did was called data processing. I studied that. I had a scholarship but then, as I explained, I got expelled from university because of my political activities.

Which year was that?

1977. They killed Steve Biko. He used to come to Fort Hare often and we knew him well and obviously his death hit us hard. There was the Riotous Assemblies Act that was used by the government to arrest us. When Biko was killed, the students gathered at the stadium to protest. The police said our protest was illegal in terms of that Act and ordered us to disperse. But we refused and they arrested us. After that, you know what the universities were like. They wouldn't let me go back. So I was removed from varsity not because of poor performance but because of politics. But IBM was sympathetic and said to me they would take me on and I can complete my studies through UNISA or wherever else, and they would pay me to be a computer programmer.

And then when I got arrested again for ANC activities, I was still employed by them. So, the police took me to go and search my office at IBM. They had me in leg irons and handcuffs but when they came to the reception at IBM, they said, 'No way he's walking in like this'. The security police at the time had all the power. They said, 'No, he's going to come in like this'. IBM brought in their security and said, 'No, he's not

coming in'. They phoned right up to the President or Minister and remember now, sanctions were biting. I don't know whether it was the Minister or the President but IBM negotiated with them. It was agreed that the security police will take off the leg lions but the handcuffs will remain because they were not sure what I'll do once I'm in the office. IBM said, 'If you keep the handcuffs, they must be in such a way that nobody must be able to see them'. Then that's how they took me in and searched my stuff.

Did they find anything there?

There's an interesting story about why they searched my stuff in the office. When I left Botswana, after they told me that the military plane operation has to be postponed, they gave instructions for other operations and I was asked to lead them. What I said was – but those people are highly trained, will they agree to be led by a civilian? They said, 'But you're not a civilian, and we will tell them that you are the leader'. So, they wrote a letter then to them. So that I don't get into trouble with this letter, I hid it in my office. During interrogation I ended up telling them that there is a letter that says this – but what I had done was that I had asked my wife when I was arrested that you must go and collect all my things from the office. They couldn't find this letter in the office – but then one right-wing White man working in the office said, 'His wife came in and removed everything'.

They went straight to my wife but she said she didn't go there. She phoned a colleague of mine and said 'Can you please remove Peter's stuff from the office and bring it to her? And if there was this letter, he was to destroy it'. So, the police went for this guy, they said to him, 'There was a letter, where's it?' He denied there was a letter but later confessed that he'd destroyed it. They said 'You must have read it, what did it say?' and then he told them what it said. They write it down and they said they're going to hold him as a state witness. But this guy was extremely smart. What a coincidence it turned out to be – he was (ANC and SACP veteran) Harry Gwala's nephew, Sibusiso Nxasana. His mother was Harry Gwala's sister. I didn't know that at that time. When he comes to testify in court, they said to him tell us what this letter said.

This guy was highly educated and he had a BSc Honors. He says to them I want to testify in Zulu. They bring in an interpreter. This interpreter says something, and then Gwala's nephew says, 'That's not what I said' (laughter). He had used a very strong Zulu word that means 'eager' – the guy speaks very high Zulu, and he had to correct the interpreter. For example, he used a very strong Zulu word and the interpreter said it means 'eager' – but the guy said, 'But I'm not eager to testify'. He had used the word *ngangingemaganga*. This interpreter didn't know that so they had to change him. They brought in a second interpreter – but there was a similar problem (laughter). They postponed the case and brought in an interpreter from northern Natal. Then when it comes to him saying what was written in the letter, he said, 'The letter said on such and such a day so and so will be getting married' (laughter). The

security police got mad. I was defended by Dennis Kuny and he defended this fellow and all of us, so that testimony never saw the light of day.

What happened to that guy, Harry Gwala's nephew? Did the police arrest him?

No, they couldn't – because now what they were going to do with him? What made me laugh when I went to Robben Island, Harry Gwala said to me, 'Oh, so this young man is as cowardly as his father'. You know Harry Gwala was a hardliner. He would have preferred that his nephew didn't even agree to testify in the first place (laughter). But that's Harry Gwala!