

Interview with Ernest Rodker by Christabel Gurney, 9 August 2013, for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom

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Christabel Gurney: Could you tell me your name.

Ernest Rodker: My name is Ernest Rodker

CG: And when and where were you born?

ER: I was born in Odessa, the Ukraine, in 1937.

CG: What do you, or did you, do for a living?

ER: I am a furniture maker and designer and I'm still doing it, but at a very much lower level than I have done in the past. But I'm still doing a bit of work now and then.

CG: Thanks. And can you tell me – were you involved in any political campaigning activity apart from your anti-apartheid activities that we are going to talk about?

ER: Yes, masses. CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament], Committee of 100, local campaigns here in Wandsworth from a community group I was involved in – my mind goes blank – but I can just quickly look at the various campaigns. But most campaigns were ongoing – the campaign against the war in Vietnam, colonial wars. I've been active in quite a number of those different campaigns over the years, and mostly at the level of trying to do actions and activities, not just as a member or a supporter.

CG: When did you first become aware of the situation in Southern Africa – apart from campaigning on it? When, looking back, did you first start thinking about apartheid?

ER: It's really difficult to remember that far back. It must have been in the late 1960s. I'd been involved in some activities about South Africa, the colonial situation – I mean Britain's colonies – and I was getting, I think, concerned and interested in the fact that we were still carrying on trading with and support for South Africa. When the whole question of the tour¹ was coming up, it seemed to me an opportunity for maybe doing something, to campaign against that. And so it probably would have been in the mid to late 1960s.

CG: And how did you actually get involved in doing something on the tour?

ER: Well, I can't remember exactly, but I must have contacted – I don't remember whether I was in touch with the Hain family beforehand. I can't remember, because

¹ The Springbok rugby tour of Britain and Ireland, November 1969–January 1970, and the Springbok cricket tour scheduled to begin in June 1970.

Walter and Ad were involved a bit in local politics, and I can't remember whether I had met them in various activities on housing issues, which I was quite involved in at that time. But certainly at some point I must have become aware that there was a question of bringing together people who were concerned about the tour and doing something about it. I got in touch with the Hains and went to the meetings, the first meetings in Gwendolen Avenue of the formation of the campaign against the tour.

CG: And what happened at those meetings?

ER: Well, I think at the beginning it was a question of being informed of what was going to be happening. I think we committed ourselves to organising actions against the tour. Peter Hain was obviously central to those discussions and he was quite prepared to – although he was beginning to get a name for himself in the Young Liberals – he was quite prepared to obviously take part in direct action type activities. And so in those early stages the group started to commit itself to trying to interrupt the tour and started planning and looking at those activities. And as that was something that I had been very involved in with the Committee of 100 and CND and anti-nuclear weapons activities and had been arrested and imprisoned on those issues, I was very much for that type of activity. And I remember it was a loose-knit group. I remember, for instance, with one or two people, going out to the airport on the night before the tour arrived and painting the road. You know, 'Go home' – whatever it was we painted, 'Springboks' – or something. I'm just trying to think now; it was the rugby tour, so it would have been that. So from early on we were beginning to look at activities we could do. And we formed a small group separately from the main Stop the Seventy Tour, where we took part in sort of extra-mural activities.

CG: So was there ever any discussion? Was it taken for granted that direct action was what it was all about in the Stop the Seventy Tour committee?

ER: I think it was taken for granted that we should not just be writing letters and trying to see principal officials involved in the Tour – that there would have to be mass activity of demonstrators against the tour and occupying pitches and doing disruptive activities was sort of in the general discussion. And Peter was exceptionally good at – because of his family background, having left South Africa – he was very charismatic, he had the Young Liberals with him. They were a very good group at that time, quite committed to direct action activities. So I think it was accepted that these sorts of activities would go on. And I can talk about that if you want me to – about one or two of the things we did that were separate. I don't think they were being discussed in the main group. There were a group of us who were doing activities that – I have subsequently seen this morning that you were involved in one of those activities, but a couple of years later.

CG: Before you go on to that can you just say something about the background to the direct action. And explain a bit about what the Committee of 100 was and what other factors – because I wonder about young people and student protests at the time.

ER: It was – I've got to get my dates right. What happened is that there was CND, which obviously in the early days had built up the early Aldermaston marches, which were terribly enthusiastic. I went on the first Aldermaston march and actually organised leaflet distribution in London for the second Aldermaston march particularly – we distributed a quarter of a million leaflets with student help in London. I may be going on a diversion here but I can remember going around London streets with Walter Wolfgang, who has just had his 80th birthday, and him driving – he says it was a Rover, I thought it was a Bentley – but anyway it was a large car driving around the streets of Soho very slowly, because that's how he drove, with a loudhailer or loud speaker on the van, doing the loud-speaking in Soho to great effect and being stopped by the police because we were so noisy. But Walter was terrific in those situations. But those were CND [activities]. What happened was that this man Ralph Schoenman came along, an American, with an artist, who still – a destructionist artist, whose name will come back to me – who put forward some ideas about direct action. There had been the direct action committee already with Mike Randall, Pat Arrowsmith, Wendy Butlin, who were doing small actions. The idea at this point was mass action on the civil disobedience level. And there were various – and that group came together and I remember going to the early meetings – in 1960, it must have been. And the first action was going to be blocking Whitehall. So there then became this extra dimension of conflict between the Committee of 100, which was led by Bertrand Russell, who had been involved in CND, and Canon Collins, who was Chair of CND. And that was unfortunate, because it did split the campaign. I won't go into it too much, but I think Canon Collins was a bit dishonest in a way, because he was involved in such activities in South Africa, and for him to complain about them being done here on grounds of moral issues in terms of the bomb seemed to me to be going a bit too far – I mean, dishonest in a way. Anyway, those issues arose and so there was a split really between the Committee of 100 and CND. And I'd been very involved in some work in CND – been in Kensington and Chelsea CND and had done quite a lot of work there locally and then, as I said, been involved in organising publicity from the Partisan Coffee House and another address in Percy Street, where we distributed leaflets and did loudhailing around London before the Aldermaston march. So I was a bit distressed about it, but anyway I thought the Committee was a good thing and got involved in that group. So my activities had generated towards sort of mass civil disobedience and direct action.

CG: So that fed into the Stop the Seventy Tour with your particular expertise?

ER? Absolutely, that was my experience and feeling that that was a worthwhile type of activity and so it proved in fact, very successful.

CG: Can you say a bit about this separate group?

ER: Going back a long way it's difficult to remember exactly the chronology of how these things worked. But I did go to the first meetings at the Hain household where we discussed a general response to the South African tours coming and trying to stop the cricket tour, because already the rugby tour was going to be used – we decided we would use it as a means of stopping the cricket tour. And how I got in touch with the Hains. I'm not sure,

but I went to those early meetings, and incidentally in looking through the files and my archives, I saw your name at one of those first committee meetings. So we've met many years ago, which neither of us remember. So what got discussed there was the way in which we committed ourselves to mass action against the rugby touring side, about going on to the pitch and trying to stop the matches and other acts of sort of extra activity, which I'll go into if you want, which happened with small groups of people. And I'm not sure whether we gave ourselves a name, but we did things like blocking – and I had a little bit of experience of this in other campaigns – using araldite glue to glue up the door of the trade mission in St Martin's Lane. We just mixed the glue and pushed it into the locks so they couldn't get into the offices when they came in the morning. We did activities like this. And that actually closed down that place, it didn't ...

CG: Did it get publicity?

ER: We weren't particular concerned about publicity. Our aim was to harass, as it were, the South African authorities. One of the other things that was done on a wider scale was through Peter Hain's contacts. I put my name forward on occasions in these incidents because I was involved. And I would claim responsibility for suggesting, because I'd had experience of this in other campaigns, of not just painting slogans on one cricket ground, but on the same night doing as many cricket grounds around the country as possible. I don't think Peter gives me credit for that in his biography, but it was my idea and he then organised it very successfully.

CG: Do you know who took part in the other places?

ER: He had the contacts and he was exceptionally good – that was his metier in many ways – at keeping contact with people, being able to do it well. I did Lords cricket ground and my wife actually got arrested on that evening for putting up a poster and we painted the walls as well. But she did get arrested at Lords. I don't know who the other people were. Peter will have known. But anyway that idea was taken on and it was very successful. You'll see from my album there that it got huge publicity – around the grounds. And actually one or two people went even further and dug up the pitches – sacrilegious that they dug up the pitches!

CG: That was the cricket tour. Can you remember back to the rugby tour?

ER: Well, the rugby tour – I can give you a couple of incidents. I wasn't involved in all of them. But there was another person in our group called Mike Craft, who was at one point in the early days of CND Chair of London Region CND. He was a dentist. He was involved in this particular campaign and we – one of the things we did was – we were trying to harass the rugby players. They were staying when they came at the Park Lane Hotel, not in Park Lane, in fact in Piccadilly, it was. And I went into the hotel. I always wish I'd kept the receipt – I'm sure I've got it somewhere in my files, but I can't find it. Anyway I went into the Park Lane Hotel on the night that we knew the rugby team was there and booked the cheapest room, which was 5 guineas, some little room. The equivalent room now is about £185 – because I recently did a film with some people

about that and they checked on that price. Anyway, it was 5 guineas. I booked into the room. I spent some time trying to think what the hell I could do once I was in there, but we had made an agreement that if I could get anything going I would ring Mike Craft. And I would then leave, because my name would be on the register and that could be incriminating. Anyway, I sat in amongst the rugby players. Now in Peter Hain's book he gives that incident to a Lady somebody or other and it wasn't – unless it was another incident, it was me and I'm no lady. She married a Lord at some point, this woman. But it was certainly me. I sat amongst the rugby players and managed during the course of the evening to get the room numbers of three or four of them. I stayed the night. I couldn't think of anything else I could do. I stayed the night. In the morning very early I left. I rang Mike Craft and he came in and glued the locks of the doors in the hotel.

CG: With them inside?

ER: Well no, with them down at breakfast. And as I understand it, I don't know how many he did, but I have the feeling from what I heard was that they had to break down the doors, so they were pretty aware that we were around and we were active and we were getting to them. And if you read Tommy Bedford's – some years later – the account, they wanted to go home. Early on they voted, the players voted, to go home.

CG: Who was Tommy Bedford?

ER: He was the captain of the touring team. And he subsequently said it was wrong and they should – anyway they voted to go home and the officials said, 'No you can't, you've got to stay'. So they were under huge pressure and they didn't do very well, the rugby team, because they were under that sort of pressure. Anyway, that was the sort of activity we did. I'm pretty sure it was the following morning when this gluing was done that another part of the campaign, another lad, I've got the reference – I always forget his name. Anyway, he got into the coach that was driving some of the supporters away, locked himself onto the steering wheel and let the brake out, and the bus went down the hill and crashed – not badly, but anyway was not usable. And he was arrested and that was, you know, we were wanting to put down our marker – this is what was going to happen throughout the Tour.

CG: So that was at the beginning ...?

ER: Yes, I think it was pretty early on because they were there and then they went out from London. And then the moment they played matches like they played at Twickenham and we went on the pitch – hundreds of people –

CG: Can you remember which match that was?

ER: I was trying to remember whether it was – there are accounts in the cuttings that I've got, but I have stretched my mind to try and remember, because one of the problems is they didn't arrest many people. We all sat down, we linked hands, we lay down. On this particular day, I remember, the pitch was very muddy and I lay down in the centre circle,

the centre of the pitch, and I was dragged away and I was covered in mud – and that was bad enough. But I think very few of us were arrested. We were dragged away and dumped outside the ground, but not arrested as I can remember. And I can't remember what match, what particular team, it would have been something like London Irish, or London something, that were playing at Twickenham. So there were other activities that were done outside London. I remember there was something being organised. Jonathan, another member of that group, reminded me that they had the idea of doing a controlled aeroplane, you know, a model aeroplane to fly over the pitch or something and drop things onto the pitch. And then there was a man who had strewn the pitch with drawing pins. So there were various activities like that that were going on. And there was some activity in Bristol with the hotel and the team that I wasn't involved in, but I don't know the details. Mike Craft was there, but Mike is dead. So whether Peter has records of that I don't know. But there were activities like that going on around the country. The – what was it just came to mind? Then the other activity we organised again came out of this small group, was to do something at Lords. Now there had been publicity that the Lords cricket pitch, the ground itself, had been surrounded with barbed wire, and there had been pictures in the press of this, but we devised a plan. A friend of mine was a member of the Lords – he was a Lords member, he could go and play squash. So we hired – or someone had – a Dormobile, a big van, and I spent some time manufacturing passes, copying the passes that you used to get in. And I went there with my friend beforehand just to see how it worked and what it was. And so on this occasion we had organised about 10 or 11 people, maybe one or two more, in the back of the van and we were in the front and we drove up to Lords. The idea was to get onto the pitch and play a cricket match. Now we knew we wouldn't be able to get onto the middle. But we thought if we could get into the ground it would be fantastic publicity. In the event we got to the gates. The gates opened, the doorman there looked at our pass, seemed happy with that. But just before we drove in he said, 'Can I look in the back of the van?' And our hearts dropped. Anyway he went and looked in the back of the van, opened it and out poured out these ten or eleven people or more. And the subsequent activity was that we played a cricket match in the street outside Lords, which got quite a lot of publicity and a lot of motorists angry. And I was just looking at the press cutting before you came and I saw that it mentions that one or two people stopped their cars, got out and joined in the game. I don't remember that. But the whole thing was good because it got publicity. And the aim was really not to be outrageous in terms of offending people, but to show that this was beyond the pale, that this should not be happening, and it was because of what was happening in South Africa and we should not be accepting the Tour. And we got our message across.

CG: And this was before the 1970 cricket tour and after the rugby tour – in the spring of 1970?

ER: This was at the end of the year and I think went into the beginning of the following year – '69-'70. And the aim was at the cricket tour, because cricket pitches would be much more difficult to defend and to protect. So – and then the last one that comes to mind immediately was again this group, with Peter this time – was an action at one of the international matches. And Peter was very good with his contacts in the press about

finding out what was happening, and I think it was through him that we knew where the tour team was staying, for instance, in which hotels. I can't remember his name, but one of the journalists that we were in touch with was very good about giving us the information; we were getting information from sympathetic journalists. And on this occasion we got tickets for the match – it was the International with England at Twickenham. And I was one of those people who was given a ticket, with two or three other people. We were in the front row of the pitch. And the idea was that we would be a diversion and then one of the other members of the group would run up to the goalposts and lock themselves on a lock-on onto the goalposts and hold up the game, and make the activity. We, I think, I can't remember who were the other people. There were probably about three or four of us. And we were sitting there on the benches at the side of the pitch and we got up and we went onto the pitch. We had to be, I think, quite courageous really because the place was swarming with police. We were surrounded by pro-rugby supporters. Anyway, we got onto the pitch and immediately we were stopped and we sat down and they started to drag us. But we got all the attention and then this other person got to the goal posts and then locked on. But the police were obviously well prepared and they had bolt-cutters and it didn't last long. But it got quite a lot of publicity and it would have been seen by 80,000 people.

CG: There's a film clip of that.

ER: Well, again it was successful, it worked. And that was again the small subgroup and in this case we had to do it with Peter Hain, because we had to get the tickets and things. And what I particularly remember is having been stopped, being picked up and then carried out. And we were carried out down the side of the pitch in front of all these rugby supporters and as we went – I was being carried – I can't remember where the others were – that was my Committee of 100 experience, not to walk but demand they carried. And I was very heavy and I was very experienced at going limp. You became much heavier if you do that. So it took at least four bulky policeman. But as we got carried, all these supporters were kicking us, you know. They were thumping us and kicking us. It was a slightly daunting experience. I don't remember being too badly injured, but I do remember being kicked quite hard by a whole number of people.

So I think all these activities contributed to building up the fact that the cricket tour was going to be impossible. And I think you'll see from the cuttings – what I've tried to do with the cuttings I have – is show that the authorities were really really determined not to cancel the cricket tour, but gradually their view started to change. And in the end Callaghan, I think, more or less told them that they had to change their minds and cancel the tour, because he wasn't prepared to put up, obviously, with scenes that happened with the rugby tour with the cricket matches. So it had an incremental effect, what we were doing, and of course at the same time there were these huge demonstrations of thousands, in many cases, of anti-apartheid members and people against the tour, going onto the rugby pitches and stopping the matches.

CG: That was my next question. When you were doing all this, were you aware that the Anti-Apartheid Movement was ... ?

ER: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And I wasn't active in the anti-apartheid – I had gone to a number of the vigils outside South Africa House. I had gone on occasions to that.

CG: These were on other issues?

ER: Yes, on other issues – and there was a permanent picket there for a whole number of years.

CG: That was later.

ER: That was later. But I carried on with that and I know my son went on that quite often. But I mean he had only just been born at this time. So I had sort of – was supporting the Anti-Apartheid Movement. I had been going to Executive or CND meetings at – what's it called – where Canon Collins lived?

CG: Amen Court.

ER: At Amen Court – I'd been going to meetings there. So I had been listening to Diana [Collins] and him talking about other activities and South Africa on occasions.

CG: Yes, he was involved both in CND and the Defence and Aid Fund.

ER: Yes, in taking in money and supporting the guerrilla movement in South Africa. So yes, I had been involved. But I was mostly involved with the smaller groups, I think really, doing these sort of activities. And I can remember when – following what was happening – and thinking 'Will they, won't they?' with the cricket tour. I lived in Fulham at the time and coming back with a group of people – we'd been at a demonstration – and someone said, 'They've cancelled the tour'. And I can remember this explosion of joy in the street, outside our house, realising that we'd won and been effective. And of course one maybe shouldn't overplay activities, but I think that was the turning point really. I think with all the groundwork that Anti-Apartheid had done and then this explosion of activity against the tours. I think after that it was pretty well going to be difficult for South Africa to weather the storm, really.

CG: Did you at the time or later think about the role of sport? How important did you think the sports boycott was?

ER: I think it was very important – and I still do, in activities. And there is always this argument that it is better to participate and do things than maybe have the boycott, but I'm not sure I've ever been convinced about that, because you get pulled into the activities and allow them to happen, and I think that the boycotts like the goods boycott

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CG: The role of sport as opposed – not opposed at all but compared with – the economic boycott. Was it easier to boycott sport than impose sanctions against South Africa?

ER: I'm not sure – I think it proved right in that particular case. But there had been boycotts of the tennis tour, for instance, less successful at Wimbledon and one or two other places. These things happen at moments when – I don't know that one necessarily can say that was down to us being perceptive enough to say this is going to make the change. But at that moment taking part in those activities and doing it successfully did make the difference for that particular campaign. Anti-Apartheid, SANROC [South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee], all of those groups, had been campaigning for many years. The situation in South Africa was getting more difficult. There were divisions about what was happening there. And I think it just was the right time for that extra activity.

CG: Why do you think the sports boycott – that the opposition to the Springbok tours in 1969 and '70 took off in that particular way?

ER: I don't know that one can analyse it particularly. I think something happens, you know, a spark, it's the right tune. The student movement was blossoming and there were various activities going on in the student movement. The students were terribly important because the rugby tour was going to university towns and playing university teams. I think they had a schedule of about 20 odd teams they were playing in that tour, many of them were in university towns, cities. And so the students were very involved in coming out and demonstrating against the matches. So it just coalesced really. The groundwork had been done. Things in South Africa – I can't remember the date of Sharpeville – it was much earlier, wasn't it?

CG: 1960.

ER: So things had built up a momentum – the anger against those activities and the suppression of the black people in South Africa. Peter Hain was charismatic, was the right person at the right time. He had the support of his family. He made contacts with people in the press. So it all came together very well. And I don't know – you know, there is a whole campaign about Israel, for instance, at the moment. I've been very involved in that again because I supported someone who had been in prison in Israel for many years. That is beginning to take effect. There is a build-up more and more now of people saying 'Enough is enough' about what is happening there. Whether it will come to the same conclusion I don't know. But I can see the beginnings of the build-up where people who might have said 'No, we can't do this' are now saying 'Yes, we've got to take action against Israel'. So I think it just, I wouldn't be able to analyse it particularly, it just happened well.

CG: Were you involved in anti-apartheid activities after that?

ER: Not really. I went on marches – because I think what happened after that in the early '60s – the late '60s, early '70s – I'm finding it difficult to remember.

CG: Did you go on the marches in the '80s?

ER: I always went on the big marches. I always went on the big marches for that and for CND, anti-nuclear. I got a bit involved in other extramural activities of converting vans to take literature to the east European countries and did a number of conversions for sort of socialist books and magazines that were taken into Poland and Czechoslovakia. I didn't do many, but that took up quite a lot of time because that was quite a lot of work. So there were always things going on. I ended, apart from when I first got involved, and that was in CND, I didn't get involved in the big organisations.

CG: Looking back, you may have said enough about what you feel about this already, but do you think all that activity was worth it? How do you feel about it now?

ER: Oh, I think it was one of the – I think it was terrific. I think the groups worked well together. It was successful. You know, people say to you, 'Oh well, what do these activities achieve? They don't achieve anything.' And that is one of the examples I would give of achieving a massive amount. I may be giving too much credit to it, but I think that was the beginning of the end of apartheid. I think it was a real blow and I think they lost their confidence and we gained a great deal. I think the Anti-Apartheid Movement gained a great deal of strength from that success and people realised you could be successful with these campaigns. And it was the combination – it was the mass action that was being organised, the formal activities going on and then these direct action publicity-orientated activities. And all together they coalesced and combined, and they baked the cake really. They were successful. So I have no regrets about that that I can think of.

CG: Thank you very much. Is there anything else you want to add?

ER: No, I think as you look through some of the things here, there might be more that comes to mind.