



Interviewed: Richard Stern
Oral History Clip Title: Racism?
Theme: Politics and Apartheid
Interviewer: Lisa Newman
Date: 23 February 2016
Oral History Number: AC 426

(Richard)

It's interesting. Most people think South Africans are racist just because of apartheid. It's not entirely true because basically when you grew up with apartheid you just accept it that way. You didn't actually knowingly go out to be a racist. So we had a cook who was a Hottentot. Do you know anything about the Hottentots? Hottentots were beachcombers. They lived along the shores. They hunted for mussels. They were basically beach combers. And then they went inland. And today they're almost extinct. They were very short people with very big backsides. And they were hunters—hunters and gatherers. We had a Hottentot cook. Her name was Alice. I spent hours and hours in the kitchen with Alice eating fish heads, because nobody in my family would ever dare to eat a fish head. And to this day I still eat them, much to the disdain of my friends. When we go out to restaurants, I eat the eyes, I eat the gills. They're grossed out by it, but that's what I grew up with. And then we had a house boy called Lazarus. He was from Malawi, I think? And he during the war years was our father. He would come up to school if we didn't eat our porridge. He'd come up to school and haul us out of the classroom. He'd knock on the door and he'd say, "Are the Stern boys in?" The teacher would say, "Yes." And he'd say, "Announce they got to come home to finish their porridge." Well, that only happened once or twice before we got a little embarrassed and started eating our porridge or throwing it out the window so that nobody would find it. So, like all [sic] we had the police after us a few times for doing certain things, but, generally speaking, you had a great deal of respect for the Africans. My first experience, I am hopping further ahead when I was 18, was when I went on to work my first farm. It was a Jewish farmer. And over the weekend—it's a long story—but one of the workers—it was a coloured man, not an African. There were not many Africans in Cape Town in those years. They came further on from the north. So this guy threatened me with a knife. He was drunk. And then when Tebby—his name was Tebby Saxon—came home from the weekend, he said, "How did it go?" and I said "Well, I had a little problem." I explained to him and he called this guy—his name was Isaac—and he said, "Isaac did you threaten...?" In those days it was "Boss Richard." And Isaac said, "Yes." So he said to him, "You have a choice. Either I'll give you justice or we'll call the police. Which one would you like?" And of course he chose Tebby and Tebby beat him in front of me. And that was my first experience because Muizenberg was an easy place to live. My first experience of, you know, the difference between white and black and how justice was handed out. It was much harsher north, near Johannesburg. Terrible. I mean they did terrible things to the Africans.

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