

Ahmed Kathrada

Ahmed "Kathy" Kathrada was born on August 21, 1929, in Schweizer Reneke, a small town in the Transvaal (now Gauteng Province) where he was taught at home from the age of six by David Mtshali, the principal of a local African school, because the town had no schools for Indian children. At the age of eight he was sent to Johannesburg where he enrolled at the Newtown Indian Primary School. Here he came under the influence of Dr Dadoo and the Cachalia brothers, leaders of the freedom movement. His political work began in 1941, when at 12 he joined the Young Communist League, handing out leaflets at street corners for the League and later joined the Communist Party of South Africa. During World War II, he was involved in the anti-war campaign of the Non-European Front.

At 17 he left school without completing his matriculation examinations (later rewriting successfully) to work full-time in the offices of the Transvaal Passive Resistance Council. In 1946, the South African Indian Congress launched the Passive Resistance Movement against the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act. The act was vehemently opposed and Kathrada was one of the 2,000 volunteers imprisoned and served a month in a Durban jail along with resisters such as Monty Naicker, Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Dr Goonam, George Singh, Mrs Gool and M D Naidoo. Kathrada was a founding member of the Transvaal Indian Volunteer Corps and that of its successor, the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress.

As the alliance between the African and Indian Congresses developed, Kathy came into contact with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, J.B. Marks and other African leaders. Kathy worked tirelessly to promote joint action as a leader of the Youth Action Committee co-ordinating the youth wings of the African, Indian and other Congresses.

In 1950, he enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand for a Bachelor of Arts degree and joined the Student Liberal Association. In 1951, he attended the World Youth Festival in Berlin, and was elected leader of the South African delegation. He remained to attend a Congress of the International Union of Students in Warsaw and eventually travelled to Budapest and worked at the headquarters of the World Federation of Democratic Youth for nine months. He helped organise the "Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws", and was charged with violating the Suppression of Communism Act and organising the Defiance Campaign. He was given a suspended sentence of nine months in 1952. In 1954 he was served with banning orders prohibiting him from attending any gatherings. In 1955 he helped organise the Indian Parents' Association, and was elected its secretary. In the same year, he helped organise the multi-racial "Congress of the People" which proclaimed the "Freedom Charter". A year later in 1956 he was arrested for treason in a nation-wide swoop. The trial lasted from 1957 until March 1961. Eventually all leaders were found not guilty. Following the Sharpsville massacre (1960), he was detained for five months during the State of Emergency. In 1961, Kathy was arrested for serving on a strike committee that opposed Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoed's plan to declare South Africa a Republic, and in 1962 was subjected to "house arrest" for 12 hours a day. He went underground and continued attending secret meetings. A year later he was arrested with other leaders of the underground movement at Liliesleaf Farm. Kathy was charged, along with other leaders, with organising and directing the *Umkhonto we Siwze* ("Spear of the Nation"), the military wing of the ANC, and was sentenced to life imprisonment.

He spent a total of 26 years (and 3 months) in prison, 18 of which were on Robben Island and the remainder at Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town. While in prison, Kathrada obtained the following University Degrees: *B.A. (majors in History and Criminology)*, *B. Bibliography (majors in African Politics and Library Science)*, *B.A. Honours in History and a BA Honours in African Politics*. He was released on 15 October 1989, at the age of 60. On his release he was given a hero's welcome in Soweto where he addressed a crowd of 5 000 people. Kathrada has been a member of the NEC of the ANC, a Member of Parliament, a Parliamentary Counselor in the office of President Mandela, Chairperson of the Robben Island Council and a Board member of the Nelson Mandela Foundation and Freedom Park. Kathrada received the following awards: the "*Isithwalandwe*", which is the highest award bestowed by the ANC; the ANC's Merit Award, for long service; the Presidential Order for Meritorious Service; Class 1: Gold; Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Massachusetts (May 2000) and Durban-Westville (2002); the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award by the President of India (2005); Doctor of Humanities, Michigan State University (2005); and Doctorate of Humane Letters by the Universities of Missouri (2004) and University of Kentucky (2011).

Kathy has written several books; "Letters from Robben Island" – 1999, "Memoirs"- 2004, "Book of Quotations"- 2005, and "A simple freedom"- 2008. His writings reflect his philosophical exploration of freedom and captivity, and provide a dispassionate account of everyday brutalities in prison life while capturing the rhythms of prison life, as well as his own personal incarceration experiences. They attest to his unwavering quest for justice despite the hardship and high personal cost.

Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabehn: The letters of Zuleika Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada 1979-1989 compiled by Vahed and Desai, chronicles the gentle correspondence between a political prisoner and a housewife during apartheid's last decade. The letters are written with wit, poignancy and style, focusing on the issues of the day and the sustenance and hope found in memory.

In 2008, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation was established to promote and deepen the practice and understanding of non racialism through dialogue. Comrade 'Kathy' as he is known is still actively writing and speaking ensuring that the legacy he fought for is still vibrantly defended.

Professor Tawana Kupe

Kirti Menon