

# Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim

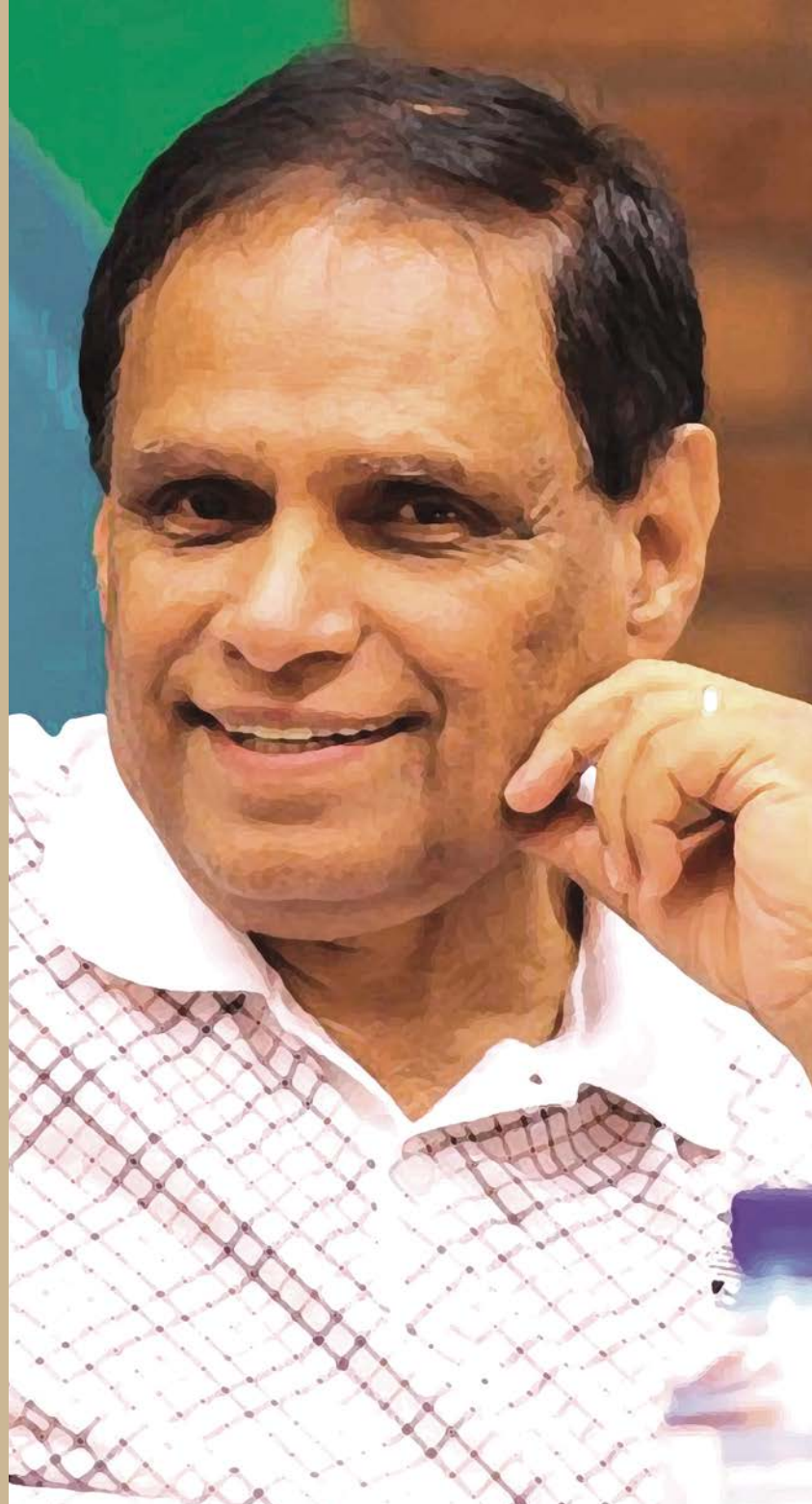
A Gentle Revolutionary

By Shannon Ebrahim

LIVES OF COURAGE PROJECT



Ahmed Kathrada  
Foundation  
Deepening Non-Racialism



The Ahmed Kathrada Foundation would like to acknowledge the input of the following individuals in the production of this booklet:

*Shannon Ebrahim*

*Ismail Vadi*

*Neeshan Balton*

*Zaakirah Vadi*

*Joe Raman*



## Foreword

In a final interview just before his hospitalisation and passing, anti-apartheid struggle stalwart Ahmed Kathrada was asked to sum up the life of Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, or “Ebie” as he is fondly known, in one word.

Kathrada said that “courage” best describes him. He added that Ebie’s life has been characterised by the “spirit of sacrifice”.

This booklet captures precisely that – the story of someone who from his early teens, dedicated his life to political activism, in time becoming one of the most senior leaders of the liberation movement. It is the story of someone who despite immense obstacles - including torture, imprisonment and constant degradation at the hands of the apartheid state - remained resolute in the struggle for freedom.

With an interesting selection of historical photographs, a very detailed, yet easy to read account of his life, quotations from Ebie himself, as well as extracts of his revolutionary court statement, the

booklet adds great value to documenting our liberation struggle.

It forms part of the ‘Lives of Courage Project’, an initiative by the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, aimed at preserving the stories and legacies of anti-apartheid struggle stalwarts.

That the booklet is written by Ebie’s wife, Shannon, makes it an extra special tribute, one that in years to come, will be something that their children will treasure.

When deciding on the title for this booklet, the Foundation wanted to ensure that comrade Ebie’s courage, as well as his kind-hearted, humble nature was captured. The title, ‘A Gentle Revolutionary’ was apt.

Churchill said that “courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.” It is no surprise that Ebie is a master of both – his ability to challenge oppression and speak out, and to listen to people – be they leaders or ordinary folk - make him the courageous personality that he is.

As he marks his 80th birthday, we salute his courage and his ongoing determination to make our world a better place.

### **Neeshan Balton**

Executive Director  
Ahmed Kathrada Foundation

1 July 2017

# Childhood



*Ebrahim as a boy of about 8 years.*



*Ebrahim at 10 years.*

Ebrahim was born on 1 July 1937 in Durban to parents of Indian origin. His mother, Hafeeza, and grandmother, Sarah Khan, were both born in South Africa. His father, Mohamed Adam Modan, had travelled in 1933 to South Africa by boat from Gujarat in North West India. His father came from the village of Chasa near Alipore and was compelled to adopt the surname of the family he had accompanied to South Africa, which was Ebrahim.

When Ebie was six months old his mother fell seriously ill and was unable to care for him. She entrusted him into the care of his grandmother Sarah, who ended up raising him until she passed away. Sarah lived with her extended family on a farm in Effingham, located 50 kilometres outside of Durban. The farm was surrounded by sugar plantations and forests, and his grandmother owned a shop close to a quarry. Ebie developed a close bond with his grandmother whom he considered as his mother, and grew up on the farm tending to cows and playing with his only playmate, an African boy named, Umfana Kanina. The family was not wealthy enough to buy him toys so he made wire push cars and spent his time playing in the fields.



*Ebrahim and his school class in 1947.*

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

In the evenings the family and their neighbors would sit outside around a fire and tell stories. During the day they would hear the workers in the nearby quarry breaking stones, and later hear their singing after a long day of hard labour. Little did young Ebrahim know then that his destiny would entail him also breaking stones in a quarry in Robben Island Prison many years later.

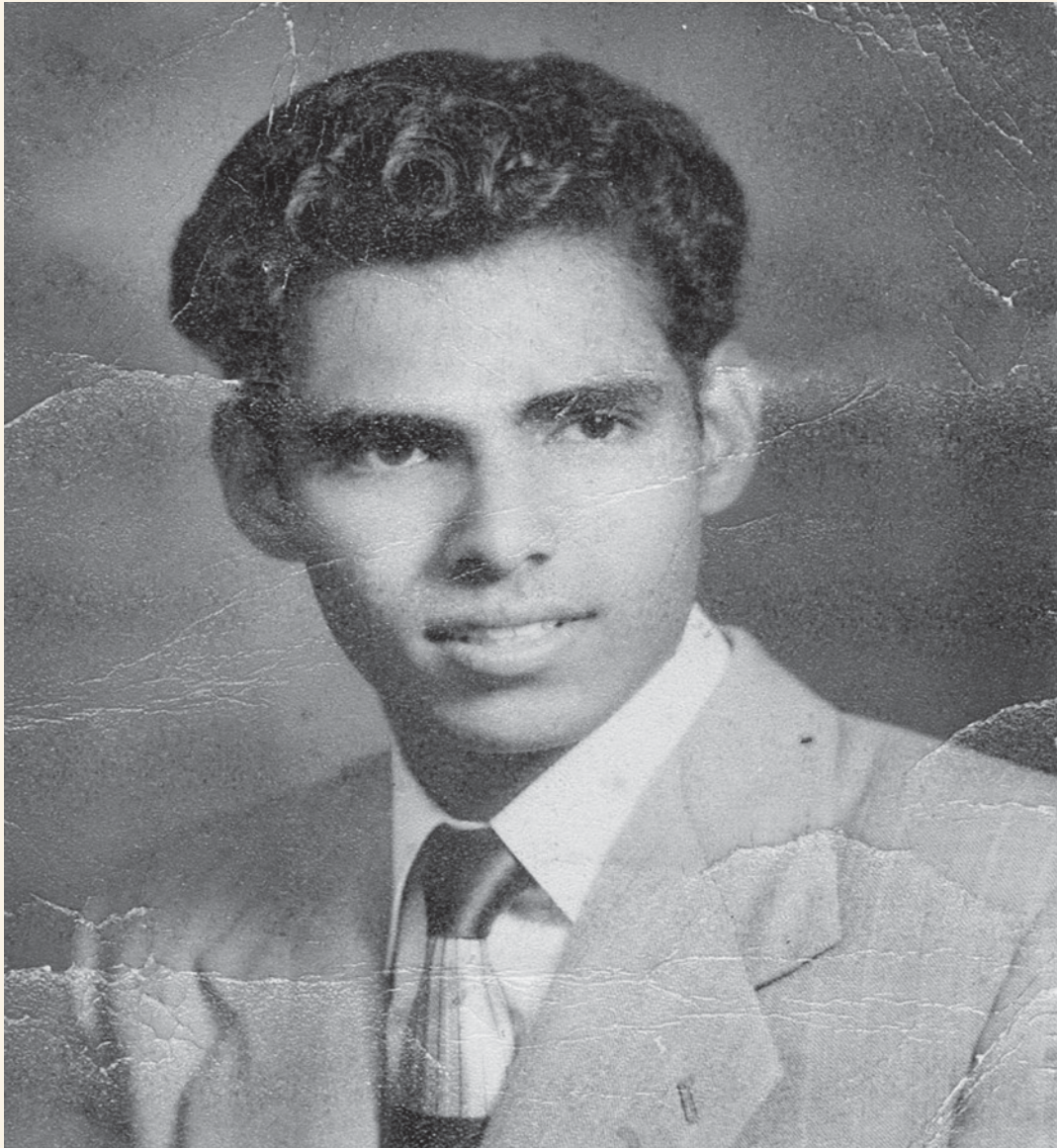
Ebie's birth parents lived in Johannesburg as his father was classified under apartheid as a "Transvaal Asian". He needed a special permit to visit his family in Durban, and so Ebrahim's visits with his parents and other siblings were few and far between. His parents later moved to Durban and lived in Candella Road illegally. Ebrahim twice witnessed his father's arrest and deportation for living in Natal without a permit.

Ebrahim was eager to start school, but every year his grandmother took him to enroll in primary school, she was told that the school, which was designated for Indian children, was full and could not accommodate him. He was prevented from enrolling in primary school for five consecutive years, until he turned ten years old, and finally found a place in a government-aided school, The Hindu Tamil Institute. He was a good student and enjoyed the company of other children, which he had been denied for much of his childhood.

In 1949, when Ebrahim was 12 years old, he and his grandmother moved to Greyville in Durban, a culturally rich Indian residential area. It was in the city that he became aware of racial discrimination, with beaches, benches, restaurants and amusement parks reserved for whites only. He became aware of Mahatma Gandhi's passive resistance campaign in India, and the campaigns of South African leaders of Indian origin like Drs Yusuf Dadoo and Monty Naicker, Presidents of the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congresses respectively. After the National Party won the elections in 1948, Ebrahim could sense the growing fear and anxiety within the Indian community, as the racist party had promised to repatriate the Indians back to India.

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# Youth



*Ebrahim as a young man in his early twenties.*

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary



*Ebrahim and little cousins in Durban around 1955.*

In 1950, when Ebrahim was just 13 years old, he would attend mass rallies in Red Square (now Nicol Square) in Durban with his older brother, Gora Ebrahim, where he was inspired by the speeches of leaders of the ANC and Natal Indian Congress (NIC) such as Chief Albert Luthuli and Dr Monty Naicker. He was soon roped in to help distribute pamphlets for the ANC following the call of the Congress Movement for a stay-away on 26 June 1950. Thus began his keen interest in the campaigns of the ANC and the NIC. In 1952, he joined the Natal Indian Youth Congress.

His political involvement grew during the Defiance Campaign (1952) in which he volunteered to participate, but his superiors turned him down as he was too young. His seniors knew that had he been caught by the apartheid police defying racial laws as an underage youth, he could have been subjected to violent lashes.

But Ebrahim defiantly proceeded to the offices of the NIC in Durban, where he enlisted in the Defiance Campaign and became involved in the daily running of the campaign. After school he spent his time printing leaflets, arranging meetings, carrying posters, and selling publications such as *People's World*, *Advance*, and



*Ebrahim and his family at his parents' home on Candella Road in Durban around 1955.*



later *The New Age*. He sold copies of *The New Age* every weekend at mass meetings and at bus ranks until it was banned in 1961. Ebrahim lived in First Avenue in Greyville, and people who knew of his connection with the ANC used to call him Afrika.

In 1954, at the age of 17, he was elected Chair of the Greyville branch of the NIC. A year later he became a member of the Durban Committee that was tasked with mobilising for the Congress of the People. Ebrahim canvassed Indian municipal workers in Magazine Barracks and solicited their views for incorporation in the Freedom Charter, which would be discussed at the Congress of the People to be in Kliptown on the 25-26 June 1955.

The highlight of his early political development was when he was elected to represent the NIC's Greyville branch at the Congress of the People. As a South African of Indian origin, he was prohibited from travelling beyond the borders of Natal without a permit but he defied the restrictions and travelled to Kliptown by car with Ismail Gangat. During the Congress the police had raided the premises and as Ebrahim had not applied for a permit to be out of Natal, he was counselled to give the police a false name and address.

The Congress of the People left a deep impression on Ebie and strengthened his commitment to the anti-apartheid

struggle. The commanding slogan on 26 June 1955, the day the Freedom Charter was adopted, had been, "South Africa belongs to all who live in it!"

Ebrahim later said,

"Looking back in retrospect, it is amazing that after so many years of oppression, racism and exploitation, the black oppressed people together at Kliptown defined the concept of a free people in non-racial terms."

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In 1956, Ebrahim and his comrades focused on the Treason Trial and were pre-occupied with putting up posters, handing out leaflets, and going door to door collecting funds for the Trial Defense Fund. He had gone to see off the Treason Trialists at the railway station and carried a placard, "We Stand By Our Leaders," which brought on an ugly incident of being manhandled by a policeman.

Ebie completed high school at Sastri College in 1959, and enrolled in Salisbury Island University in 1963, which was designated for Indian students. The university campus provided him cover from the security police and gave him the opportunity to mobilise students. He established an underground body called the Island Student Association, which campaigned against apartheid university institutions.

Ebrahim worked tirelessly to build the branches of the NIC in Durban and surrounding areas. He was involved in

campaigns against forced removals of black people from designated “white areas” and resistance against the pass laws. In 1959, he was elected to represent his area at the ANC’s Anti-Pass Conference in Johannesburg. The conference was addressed by OR Tambo. Ebrahim was active in mass action campaigns such as the Potato Boycott against the ill-treatment of workers on the potato farms of Bethal, the revolt of the peasants of rural Natal, and the economic boycott against firms that supported the National Party.

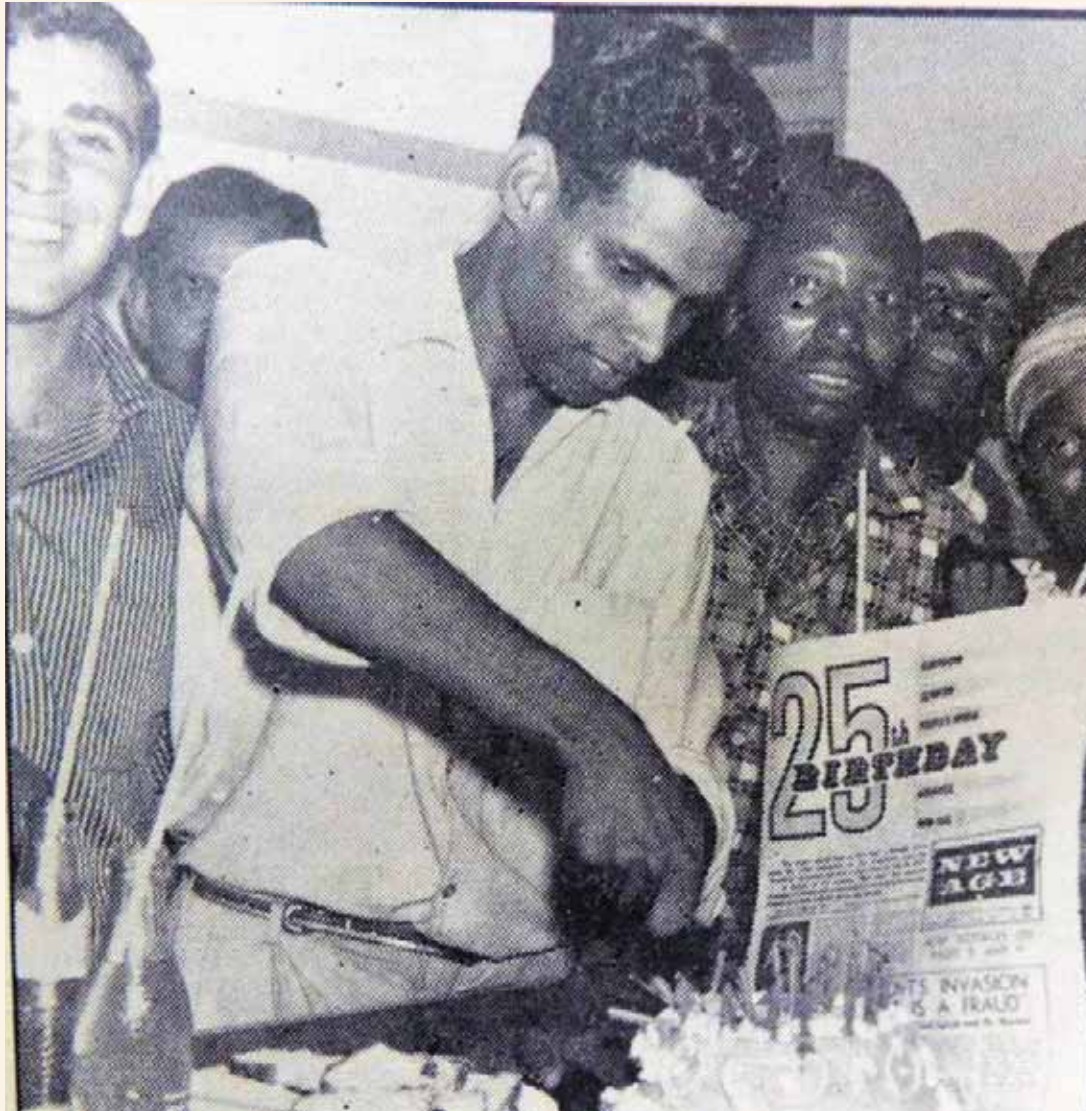
In 1960, the ANC had called for an Anti-pass Campaign and Ebrahim played an active role in organising for the campaign, which was to start on 31 March 1960. The PAC had, however, begun an anti-pass campaign 10 days earlier, and on 21 March 1960, the police opened fire on peaceful anti-pass demonstrators outside the Sharpeville police station killing 69 people. Following the Sharpeville massacre Ebrahim said he felt “frightened, sad and furious - it was our first experience of a massacre”. A few days after the Sharpeville massacre, a State of Emergency was declared and almost the entire leadership of the Congress movement was detained. On 8 April 1960, the ANC and Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) were banned. At the time membership of the ANC was confined to Africans and Ebie continued with the branch activities of the NIC.

Ebrahim called the banning of the ANC, “A direct assault on all freedom-loving people in the country because the ANC expressed the hopes and aspirations not only of the African majority, but of all democratic forces in the country. The banning of the ANC removed our hopes of achieving a free democratic society through peaceful and non-violent means. This view was reinforced when the state used all the forces at its command to crush the three-day peaceful protest call made by Mandela after the All-Africa Conference in 1961. A chapter closed in our history. We decided to meet the repressive violence of the state with the revolutionary violence of the people.”

Following the All-Africa Conference, Nelson Mandela went underground to lead the struggle. After visiting a number of African countries, he returned to South Africa and met selected comrades in secret locations around the country. Ebrahim was one of six youth comrades selected to meet with Mandela in Natal to discuss his visit to the continent and the way forward. Mandela was arrested in Natal after leaving from the meeting, tried and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

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# Sabotage Campaign



*Ebrahim cutting a cake at 'The New Age' newspaper on its 25th anniversary in 1962 in Durban.  
To the left of him is Ronnie Kasrils.*

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

Ebrahim had always abhorred any type of violence, even physical violence between individuals, and had never hit anyone in his life. But the slow realisation had come following the Sharpeville massacre that the strategies of the ANC would have to change.

On 16 December 1961, the leadership of the ANC announced the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), its armed wing that would carry out sabotage activities in the country. From the outset, the ANC leadership was categorical that MK activities should not be directed against civilians and that sabotage attacks should be viewed as a legitimate form of resistance to apartheid rule.

In a clandestine meeting, Ebrahim was told by Ronnie Kasrils that the MK Regional High Command wanted him to join MK, establish and lead a unit in the Durban central area. Ebrahim later said,

“The use of violence was a painful necessity, not something I welcomed for its own sake. I knew it would lead to suffering of the enemy as well as oppressed people. But there was no other way out. One hated the racist system and knew it was violent, and one found oneself forced to use force. If they called for armed struggle out of necessity, one followed because one’s whole life had been in the struggle.”

As an MK commander Ebrahim followed the policy of directing acts of sabotage at government installations and economic targets such as power lines, phone cables, railway lines and government offices. At no stage were civilians to be attacked. The members of the MK unit Ebrahim led were initially all amateurs. One of the members, Natvarlal Babenia, had a rudimentary knowledge of chemicals and explosives as he had participated in the armed struggle against British

rule in India. The other members were Sunny Singh, David Perumal and Siva Pillay.

The unit had no weapons, but only chilli powder to dust their trails in order to put off the tracker dogs, as well as washing gloves to prevent leaving finger prints. After they stole dynamite from a road construction site, they had thrown away the detonators as they didn’t even know what they were for. But it turned out that their stash of collected dynamite was enough to supply MK units in other regions. Their first few operations didn’t quite work out and served as a lesson in sabotage preparedness. They managed to blow up the offices of the National Party newspaper, *Natalia*, as well as the office of an Indian apartheid collaborator, A I Kajee.

Another success was the blowing up of a railway line under the Victoria Bridge in Durban - the explosion could be heard 4kms away. The attack attracted a lot of publicity.

One of the most successful operations was carried out by a special unit comprised of Ebrahim, Ronnie Kasrils, Kisten Moonsamy and Billy Nair. They managed to blow up an electricity pylon in Montclare, which plunged the whole of Durban into darkness. Ebrahim photographed the damage the next day as a *New Age* reporter. Ebrahim’s unit was considered the most effective in Natal, having carried out over eight acts of sabotage. Whenever an act of sabotage was carried out the police would race to Ebrahim’s house to check if he was home, and thanks to the timing devices on the explosives, Ebrahim was always found safely in his bed. For 18 months the sabotage attacks made headlines.

What brought an abrupt end to the sabotage campaign in 1963 was the passing of the 90-day Amendment to the Sabotage Act. The amendment empowered the police to

detain and torture anyone they suspected, and they were kept incommunicado. Many broke under the vicious torture tactics. The three months following May 1960 were fatal for the Congress Movement. A number of ANC leaders were arrested in Rivonia, north of Johannesburg and once Billy Nair and Curnick Ndlovu were arrested, Ebrahim and Ronnie went underground, establishing the underground structure of the Natal Regional High Command. The High Command consisted of Ebrahim, Ronnie, Bruno Mtolo and Steven Mtshali.

Ebrahim and Ronnie operated from a building in Kloof, with Ronnie pretending to be the landowner, Ebrahim the painter and Bruno the gardener. It was the first time Ebrahim experienced bathing in a bath tub as all his life he had bathed in a drum of water.

On 8 August 1963, Bruno failed to return as expected from a mission and it turned out he was caught by the police. He had broken under severe torture within hours and given away the whereabouts of the house Ebrahim and Ronnie were operating from.



*Ebrahim years later in Lenasia with "Mosie" Moolla and Ahmed Kathrada, who were both part of MK. Also seen is activist, Rehana Bibi Adam.*

# The Arrest



*A view of a Robben Island courtyard from behind bars. Following his arrest and trial, Ebrahim would be incarcerated on Robben Island*

Eleanor Kasrils warned Ronnie and Ebrahim that the police had discovered their previous Kloof residence and that Bruno had been arrested. They were driven by a comrade to Pietermaritzburg and it was decided that Ebrahim should return to Kloof the next day.

A comrade, David Ndwande, was due to meet them the next morning at the Kloof house and Ebrahim was sent to warn him at the Kloof train station not to go there as the unit had been exposed.

As Ebrahim got off the bus at the Kloof station he was surrounded by security police and held up at gunpoint. From that moment his life as a free man ended. He was shoved into the back seat of a car in between two security policemen and beaten all the way to Midmar Dam.

The police then beat and kicked him almost to the point of unconsciousness, attempting to drown him at one point in the dam in order to get out of him where Ronnie was hiding. But Ebrahim never said a word. The beating caused a perforated ear drum which has affected his hearing permanently.

Ebrahim was then dragged to a Durban police station where he was left wet and bruised in a cell. When he finally fell asleep he was awoken in the middle of the night by the brutal kicks of three policemen standing over him in his cell. Despite the days of torture and interrogation that followed, he refused to answer any of the questions posed by the security police.

Ebrahim was then transferred to the Point Road Prison, where he was kept in a cell in solitary confinement that would only fit a mat, without even room for a man to stretch. Other political detainees were also kept there, many of them members of MK who had been betrayed.

None of Ebrahim's family realised that he had been detained so for over a week no one brought him fresh clothes to wear. Phyllis Naidoo was eventually informed of his detention and she immediately came with clothes and food. For the rest of Ebrahim's 16 years of incarceration, he considered Phyllis as his 'political mother'.

*When he finally fell asleep he was awoken in the middle of the night by the brutal kicks of three policemen standing over him in his cell.*

*Despite the days of torture and interrogations that followed he refused to answer any of the questions posed by the security police.*

## Pietermaritzburg Sabotage Trial



*Ebrahim's father, Mohamed Modan, and his mother, Hafeeza, after Ebrahim was sentenced to 15 years on Robben Island in 1964.*



Ebrahim and 18 of his comrades were charged under the Sabotage Act. He was accused Number One. The trial was held in Pietermaritzburg at the same time as the Rivonia Trial was underway in Johannesburg. Bruno Mtolo, who had betrayed his unit and many other MK members, appeared as state witness "Mr X" in both trials. Ebie was deeply disappointed that Bruno had turned state witness, saying:

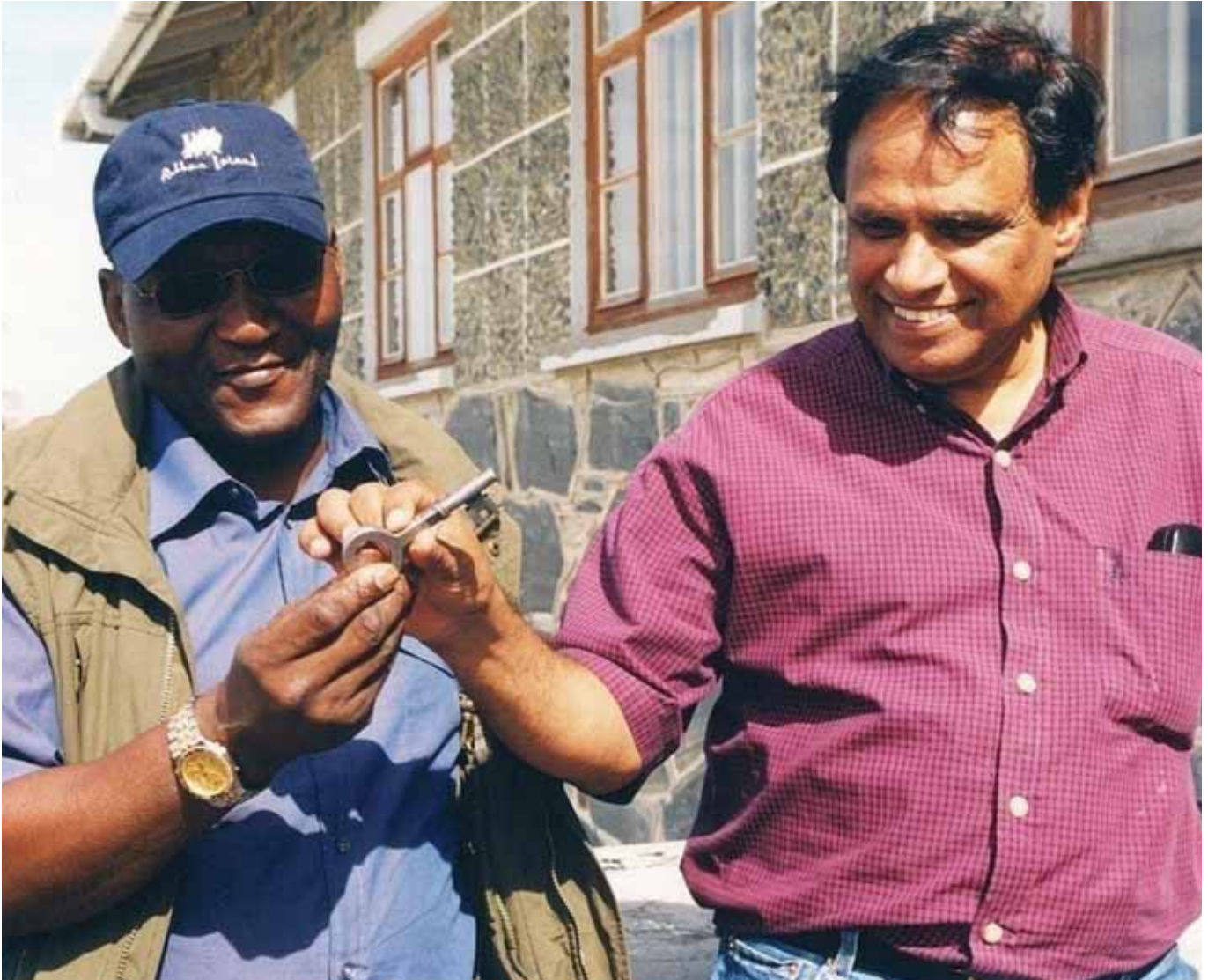
"To see some of the state witnesses with whom you had close working relations give damaging evidence against you was very disconcerting. What I could not fathom is why a comrade would agree to turn to state witness and betray his fellow freedom fighters. It was a fear of going to prison and a desire to save your own life at the expense of all your commitment to the struggle for liberation."

During the trial, it was never alleged that the accused had been responsible for loss of life or injury. They had taken meticulous care to avoid casualties. On 27 February 1964, Ebrahim was convicted of sabotage and two days later - ironically a leap year - he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on Robben Island. There was relief among family members that the accused did not get the death sentence. Within a day of their sentencing, they were put in leg-irons and handcuffs and driven from Pietermaritzburg to Leeukop prison in Johannesburg.



*Ebrahim speaking at a reunion of former political prisoners, recalling the hard labour they did on Robben Island.*

# Journey to Robben Island



*Paul Langa hands Ebrahim the master key to Robben Island Prison.*

Leeukop served as a transition prison before prisoners were transferred to Robben Island. It proved to be a week of torture as some kind of 'initiation' before being sent to the Island. Ebrahim and his comrades were subjected to invasive strip searches and having all their hair shaven off. They were then forced into cold showers and told there were no towels so they had to run around the expansive courtyard naked in order to dry off.

As the prisoners ran, the warders positioned themselves at various spots in the courtyard and would beat the running prisoners with batons. They were then denied food as they didn't "run fast enough". The forced running and beatings were carried out twice daily for a whole week, the objective being to break their spirits. But the experience at Leeukop was only a taste of what was still to come.

After a week of hell, the torturous journey to Robben Island began. All 61 political prisoners were handcuffed and leg-ironed in groups of two and herded into crowded police vans destined for Cape Town. Ebrahim was chained to Dennis Brutus. There was hardly enough room to sit and the leg-irons dug into their skin. There was a single bucket for all the prisoners to relieve themselves on the arduous journey, which proved a nightmare.

The vans made one stop in Colesberg and the prisoners slept in the prison overnight, still leg-ironed to one another. By the time they reached Cape Town they were extremely exhausted but still singing revolutionary songs.



*Robben Island former prisoners' reunion. To the right of Ebrahim is Tokyo Sexwale and Henry Makgoti.*

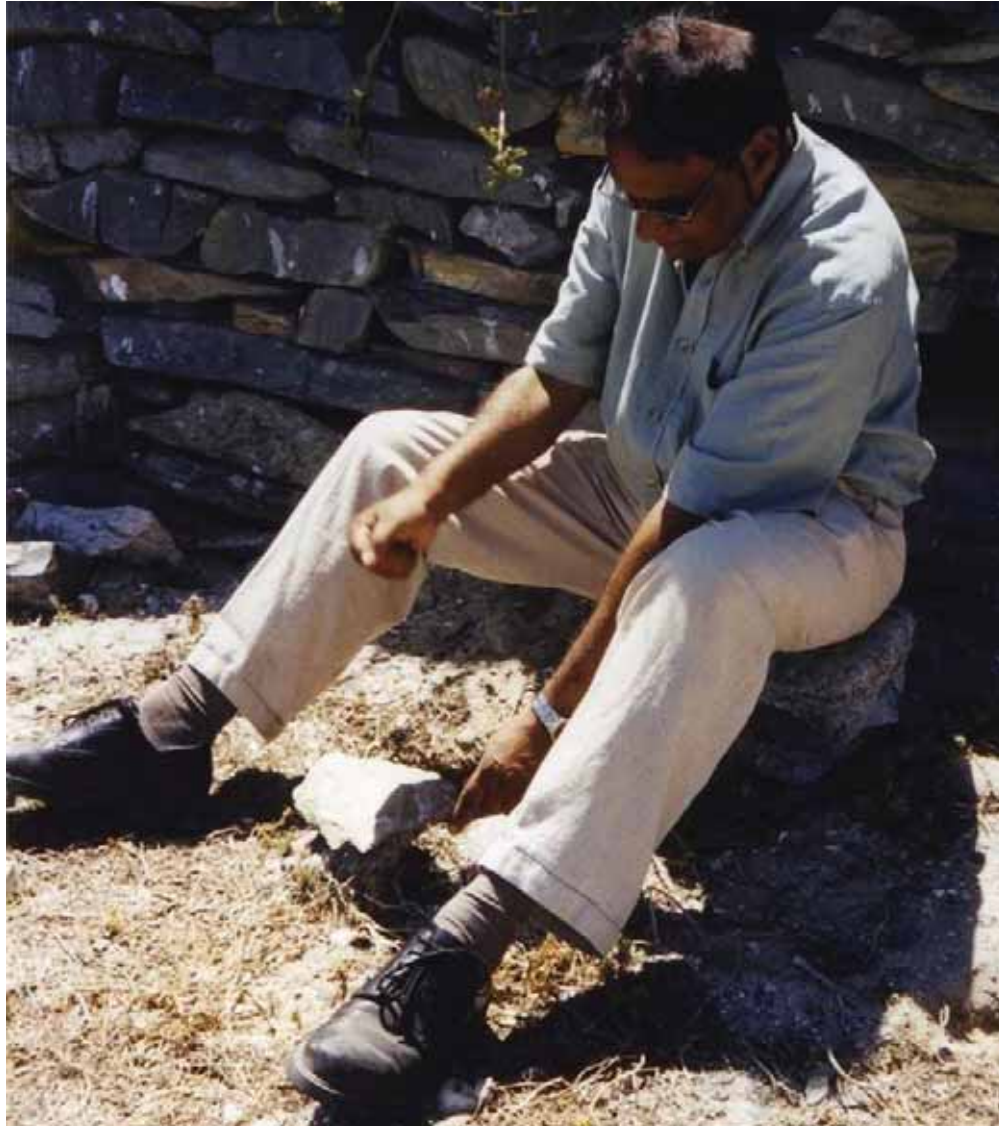
From the vans they were transferred to the bottom of the waiting ferry boats to take them across to the island. For most it had been just a passing glimpse of Table Mountain, the grandeur of which they had only heard about.

As they came off the ferry leg-ironed together in groups of two, warders were waiting for them with guns, batons and vicious barking Alsatian dogs. From that moment on, the warders would repeatedly shout that they were "not in a five star hotel".

Where they actually had landed was on one of the most feared and notorious penal colonies in the world. Ebrahim later said:

"If any of us harbored any illusion that the prison institution was primarily concerned with the safe-keeping and rehabilitation of the prisoners, this was dispelled soon after our arrival on Robben Island. The prison was an extended baton of the security police."

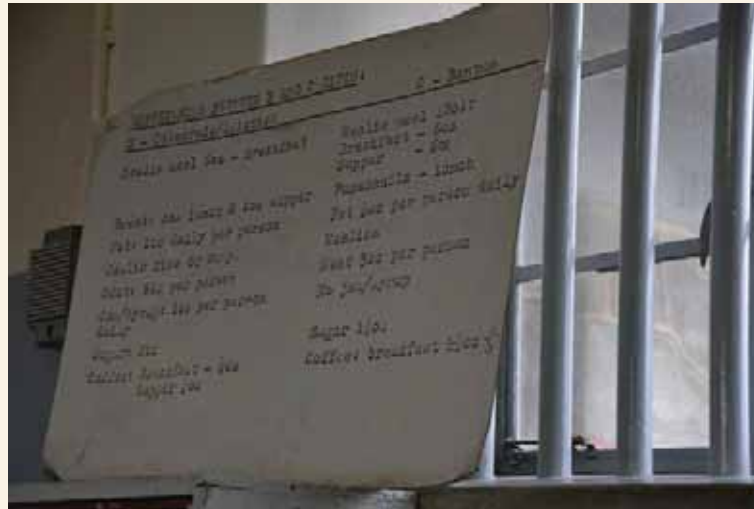
# The Torturous Robben Island Years



*Ebrahim demonstrating how political prisoners were forced to chip stones daily at the stone quarry on Robben Island.*

The very first experience that Ebrahim and his comrades had on the Island was to be punished alongside a group of prisoners who had returned from hard labour in the stone quarry and had refused to obey orders. Along with the prisoners to be punished, they were forced to run with huge boulders from one side of the prison yard to the other while the warders beat them as they ran. It was Leekop all over again.

When the punishment was over they were put into communal cells for political prisoners – with 61 men to a cell. With Ebrahim in his cell was Henry Makgoti, Sunny Singh, Jacob Zuma, Billy Nair, MacGloria Mdingi, Stanley Magoba, Dennis Brutus, Matthew Meyiwa, Curnick Ndlovu and several other ANC comrades.



*Details of prisoners' diets captured on a board inside a cell at Robben Island's communal section.*

The ANC cadres were in the minority, as in the communal cells the vast majority were PAC political prisoners.

There were no beds or pillows. Each prisoner was given three threadbare, dirty blankets and a sisal mat to sleep on. One blanket had to be rolled to make a pillow, one to cover the rough sisal mat, and the third to cover oneself. At the end of the cell were two exposed toilets and three exposed showers, which had to be shared by 61 men.

The prison bell rang at six in the morning and the 61 men were given one hour for all of them to shower in cold brackish water.

When the warders opened the cell the prisoners had to file out in twos and grab whatever two sandals they could as they exited the cell. The warders would stand over them and beat

them as an introduction to the day. They then lined up for breakfast which consisted of soft mealie porridge with one teaspoon of brown sugar and a mug of black coffee. They were forced to sit squatting in the open-air courtyard to eat. They were each given a wooden spoon that had to remain in their pocket all day and be used for each meal.

The prisoners formed a work span of 600 and were forced to do hard labour in the stone quarry that was located alongside the sea. At the quarry the prisoners were forced to chip stones and push wheelbarrows all day, with the warders constantly beating them with batons and swearing at them. For lunch the African prisoners were given cold mealies and the Indian prisoners got cold, hard mealie rice.

Occasionally, the prisoners were divided into work spans or teams. The road span would have to fill potholes in the roads

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with lime and the laundry span would wash clothing. Ebrahim was put into the bamboo span with about 15 other prisoners. From the rocks they had to pull seaweed from the cold ocean and shore, and stack it on the road to dry.

At the end of the work day the prisoners were marched back to the prison at 4pm. Day after day, they endured the worst kind of humiliation - being stripped and physically searched, and all standing naked in line for 20-30 minutes until the search was over. As the weather got colder on the island and the wind more vicious, the strip searches became absolute torture. As a result, prisoners regularly suffered from chest problems and pneumonia. Ebrahim recalled, "In prison we were assaulted, starved, under clothed and exposed to bitter cold weather. We were sworn at and humiliated in the most degrading manner. We broke stones and ate a measly meal. For years we were made to stand stark naked for long periods of time in an open courtyard, sometimes in biting cold weather. One of my close friends died of exposure."

As the prisoners filed back into their crowded communal cell, dusty and dirty from a day of hard labour, there were no clothes to change into and certainly no pyjamas. For the first few years they were not even issued underwear. The same clothes they worked in all day in the quarry were the same clothes they had to sleep in and then work in the next day. Only after a week did their prison clothes get sent to the laundry to be washed and they never got back the same set of clothes. The lights were never switched off in prison so not only did Ebrahim have to get used to the noise and irritations of other prisoners, but he had to grow accustomed to sleeping with the lights on all night.



*Ebrahim at a reunion of the bamboo span on Robben Island.  
Photo: Robben Island Museum*

# Robben Island University and School of Revolutionary Training



*Ebrahim, Ahmed Kathrada, Barbara Hogan, and Kgalema Motlanthe at Ebrahim's 70th birthday.*

Within just a year of imprisonment, Ebrahim was one of a handful of prisoners on the Island to enroll with UNISA to do a Bachelor of Arts degree, along with Nelson Mandela, Ahmed Kathrada, Siva Pillay and Jeff Masemolo. They were joined over time by a number of other prisoners who took up the study option. The prison authorities allowed studies as part of the rehabilitation of prisoners, but would



*Despite the hardships on Robben Island, prisoners ensured that they turned what was a prison, into a university that schooled activists in politics.*

*Photo: Zaakirah Vadi/Ahmed Kathrada Foundation*

cancel the reading material that even the apartheid universities allowed. Ebrahim chose to major in History and Psychology. There were occasional desktops jutting out from the walls of the cell but no chairs so prisoners had to study standing up or sitting cross legged on their sisal mat in the evenings.

As Ebrahim's prison records indicate, he had a constant struggle through the years to get university textbooks to write the required papers and exams in time. He wrote numerous letters to the Commanding Officer of the prison pleading to be given the required books. By 1979, Ebrahim had completed a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Commerce degree despite all the impediments put in his way.

Initially, Ebrahim and his comrades were only allowed to write and receive one letter every six months. Phyllis Naidoo and Ebrahim's sister-in-law, Fatima, wrote the most frequently to him in prison, along with other family, friends and comrades. Many of Phyllis' letters had sentences and even paragraphs blacked out by the censor office.

Visits were allowed only once in six months for half an hour behind a thick glass barrier. Given the cost of travelling to Cape Town - which was prohibitive for many families - and the difficulty of obtaining permission to visit a prisoner, even visits twice a year were often not possible.

Ebrahim recalls:

*"I am often asked how we were able to survive the long years of imprisonment and also maintain an amazing level of morale and determination to continue the struggle once released from prison. The fact that the authorities failed to break us down was due to our commitment to the struggle and our firm belief that ours was a just cause and victory was certain."*



Ebrahim maintains that an important factor in maintaining the prisoners' morale was the creation of a tight-knit secret cell structure in the prison. The objective was to provide leadership in terms of political education in the struggle for better prison conditions and to ensure discipline among the ANC prisoners. It was also to maintain secret contact with the ANC leadership in the isolation or B section. The secret cell structure was based on Mandela's M-Plan, which he had implemented in the 1950s. The creation of the cell structure ensured unity among the ANC prisoners and protected them from further persecution for "furthering the aims of a banned organisation in prison".

The highest clandestine structure among ANC prisoners was the Disciplinary Committee, which Ebrahim was appointed to head by the leadership in the isolation cells. His first task was to set up various committees such as the "political committee" (which was headed by Jacob Zuma), and the "news committee" (which was headed by Sunny Singh). The latter was responsible for smuggling newspapers, which were like gold to the political prisoners.



*Comrades from left to right:  
Henry Makgoti, Ebrahim Ebrahim, Reggie Vandeyar, Shirish Nanabai, and "Mosie" Moolla.*

## Release and Banning



*Ebrahim walking on the streets of Durban in 1979 following his release from Robben Island.*

Ebrahim served his 15 year sentence without a day's remission. A brigadier from the prison service first drove him all the way from Cape Town to Leeukop prison in Johannesburg. From there he was driven to a prison in Durban where he was released on 28 February 1979.

Even before he walked out of prison the authorities issued him with a banning order in terms of the Internal Security Act. He was confined to the Pinetown magisterial district, had to report every Monday to the Westville police station and was forbidden to attend any social, political or student gathering. He had previously told the authorities he would stay at his uncle's house in Reservoir Hills, but it was difficult for him to engage in underground political activity as he was constantly being monitored.

There was never any question that he would launch straight back into the struggle against the apartheid state. When he applied to move to Durban he was at first refused. So he told the security police that he could no longer stay at his uncle's house and would move to a hotel belonging to a friend.

This frustrated their surveillance as people were constantly moving in and out of the hotel. He was subsequently given permission to move to a flat belonging to his friend, Poomoney Moodley, in Carlisle Street, Durban.

For the next year and a half he engaged in regular underground meetings at night. As Ebrahim was unable to attend any mass meeting or actively mobilise people, he was involved in strategic discussions with the ANC units on their programmes of action.

# Escape and Military Training



*An ANC rally with from left to right: Ebrahim, "Terror" Lekota, Harry Gwala, Nelson Mandela and Chris Hani.*

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

In December 1980, it was brought to Ebie's urgent attention that one of the couriers for the ANC between himself and Maputo was actually a spy for the apartheid state, and that Ebrahim's life was in danger. The ANC head office in Lusaka immediately ordered him out of the country. Ebie and George Naicker were taken to the border of Swaziland from where they crossed into Maputo. Once in Maputo they were able to take a flight to Lusaka to meet with the ANC's senior leadership in exile led by Oliver Tambo and briefed them on political developments in South Africa. The leadership also briefed them on developments in the frontline areas and internationally.

From Lusaka, Ebrahim was sent for military training at the ANC camps in Angola, where he spent six months. From Luanda it was half a day's drive in the back of a truck to get to the training camp. In the camp the conditions were spartan. Comrades slept in tents on canvass beds and had to wash in the river daily. They were trained to use an AK47, small arms and sophisticated explosives – all skills he and his comrades had sorely lacked in the early 1960s during the sabotage campaign.

A number of times Ebrahim had to do night watch duty where he would be on duty on a high look-out point all night in order to check for any suspicious movement or enemy encroachment. But Ebrahim's fundamental interest had always been in the political as opposed to the military realm, and he was made the camp's news editor with the responsibility of collecting, disseminating and analysing regional and international news. With access to radios he was able to source news from the BBC, Deutsche Welle, Radio Moscow World Service and the SABC. He remembers announcing to the camp the passing away of Bob Marley on 11 May 1981, which affected many of the comrades who were big fans of the musician. While in the camp, Ebrahim endured his first bout of malaria.

On returning to Lusaka, ANC cadres in exile were under constant threat from apartheid security forces who had been kidnapping, bombing and killing ANC cadres across the frontline states and even internationally. Ebrahim was sent to Tanzania to the relative safety of the ANC's Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College for a month as there had been reports that the South African forces may attack the ANC in Lusaka. There he was re-united with his close friend Henry Makgoti, who had shared the same cell with him on Robben Island, and who was in charge of the school. As the school was based in the rural areas, the camp was infested with mosquitoes and Ebrahim again contracted malaria. The second bout was far worse than the first and he was treated in the ANC clinic by Dr Manto Tshabalala- Msimang.

*Comrades slept in tents on canvass beds and had to wash in the river daily. They were trained to use an AK47, small arms and sophisticated explosives – all skills he and his comrades had sorely lacked in the early 1960s during the sabotage campaign.*

# Running the ANC Underground from Swaziland



*While in exile, Ebrahim with his sister-in-law Fatima, his mother Hafeeza and his brother Essop.*

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

On returning to Lusaka, Ebrahim proposed to the ANC leadership that he be based underground in Swaziland, where he was closer to activists in Natal and could work on mobilizing the political underground in South Africa. This proposal presented clear risks to his life as apartheid intelligence agents had infiltrated the frontline states with agents to spy on ANC activities. Ebrahim was, as he had always been, beyond fear. He was prepared to pay the ultimate sacrifice for the struggle for liberation. Over the Easter weekend in 1982, he crossed from Maputo into Swaziland by jumping the fence to begin a life of an undercover ANC operative.



*Ebrahim in Swaziland with his sister-in-law Fatima around 1984.*

Ebrahim carried a passport given to him by the Government of India and went by the alias Ahmed Zaheer. Over the ensuing three years he was to move from one underground house to another and by 1986, he had lived in six different houses in Swaziland.

Very few comrades knew where he lived or had his phone number, other than his comrade Ronnie Kasrils and his friend, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, who was working in Mbabane as a doctor. Ebrahim would also receive medical treatment from his close comrade, Dr Zweli Mkhize, who also was working in Swaziland.



*Ebrahim and his brother Essop in Swaziland in 1983.*

Ebrahim held the position of Chair of the ANC's Regional Political and Military Committee in Swaziland, giving him the overall responsibility for co-ordinating with comrades who were responsible for the underground ANC structures in Natal and the Transvaal. Ebrahim focused on mobilising the political underground in South Africa, while Siphwe Nyanda, who went by the alias Gebuza, was in charge of military operations. All structures were answerable to Ebrahim as the regional chair and he was responsible for distributing resources from the ANC head office in Lusaka to the relevant units. Ebrahim would usually conduct his underground political meetings at night.

Living a secret underground existence was no doubt a lonely experience and in March 1983, Ebrahim had a relationship with an American academic, Julie Wells, who had visited Swaziland as a courier for the ANC. From that relationship was born Ebrahim's first child, Cassia Wells, who initially grew up in the United States. Cassia ended up schooling in South Africa and went on to become a Stanford educated medical doctor, who has specialised in preventative medicine, making her father very proud.

By 1983, Swaziland had become increasingly dangerous for the ANC underground as the Swazi King Sobhuza II (who had protected the ANC) died a year earlier. Under the rule of his successor, King Mswati III, the apartheid security forces succeeded in recruiting several members of the Swazi police as collaborators.

By March 1984, Mozambique also became a killing field for the ANC following the signing of the Nkomati Accord between the Mozambican and apartheid South African governments. Many of the ANC comrades based in Maputo were sent to Swaziland and the hunt by apartheid security operatives for ANC cadres reached unprecedented levels.

Against this backdrop Ebrahim shared an underground house in Mbabane with Helene Passtoors, a comrade who was part of an elite MK unit doing special operations under the direct command of MK's Chief of Staff, Joe Slovo. Ebrahim had first met Passtoors in Maputo and despite the security concerns of their superiors they developed a relationship. For the first time in a quarter of a century Ebrahim enjoyed a taste of family life with Passtoors and her four children. At times Ebrahim's own family would also visit him from Johannesburg, bringing along Indian food. To them he was "Chota" meaning "small one". In addition to his mother, brother Essop, sister-in-law Fatima, and sisters Ayesha and Fatima, Ebrahim's elder brother Gora, who was the Pan Africanist Congress's 'shadow foreign minister' in exile, also visited him.



*Ebrahim's brothers visit him at his underground house in Swaziland. From left to right: Essop, Gora and Ebrahim.*

# Infiltration into South Africa



*A sketch of Ebrahim in disguise while underground in Durban in 1985, done by Jansie Niehaus and given to Helene Passtoors as a birthday present while she was in prison.*



In late 1984, the ANC leadership asked Ebrahim to infiltrate South Africa in disguise. The aim was to get him to stay in Durban in order to hold discussions with the ANC's underground leaders in preparation for the upcoming Kabwe Conference in Zambia scheduled for June 1985.

In December 1984, Ebrahim jumped the fence from Swaziland into South Africa.

Once in the country he developed a disguise – his hair was grown long and unruly; he donned a beard and moustache, with large heavy set eye glasses. Once in Durban, he had been sitting in an office when one of his close relatives walked in by coincidence and didn't even recognize him.

The Mandla Judson Khuzwayo (MJK) unit in Durban led by Moe Shaik was tasked with receiving Ebrahim, protecting him and facilitating his contacts during his political mission in the country. The Shaik brothers - Moe, Yunus and Chippy - as well as Shirish Soni played a key role in ensuring Ebrahim's security and ability to operate. Moe rented him a flat in Overport directly opposite his own flat and they had a system of flicking on the lights to alert each other that Ebrahim was home safely.

While in South Africa Ebrahim set up new clandestine units, communication channels and drafted detailed reports on the scale and tempo of resistance to apartheid. His work was vitally important for obtaining a clear picture of events on the ground in 1985.

After six months of being in the country, Ebrahim was anxious to plan his escape route as he needed to report to the Kabwe conference. On two occasions Moe and members of his unit tried to smuggle Ebrahim across the border but each time something went wrong.

During this period Passtoors had moved to Johannesburg to carry out special operations-related work under the cover of being a Wits PhD student. The police began surveilling Passtoors although they were unaware of who she was or what she was involved in. In May 1985, Passtoors was detained and kept in solitary confinement. A week after she was detained the security branch realised that Ebrahim was in the country.

Aware that Ebrahim and members of the MJK unit were under surveillance, Moe Shaik knew that the security branch was closing in and their arrest was imminent.

Ebrahim was handed over to Pravin Gordhan's unit, which was to hide him. Moe, Shirish Soni, and shortly after that Yunus and his father, Lambie Rasool, were detained.

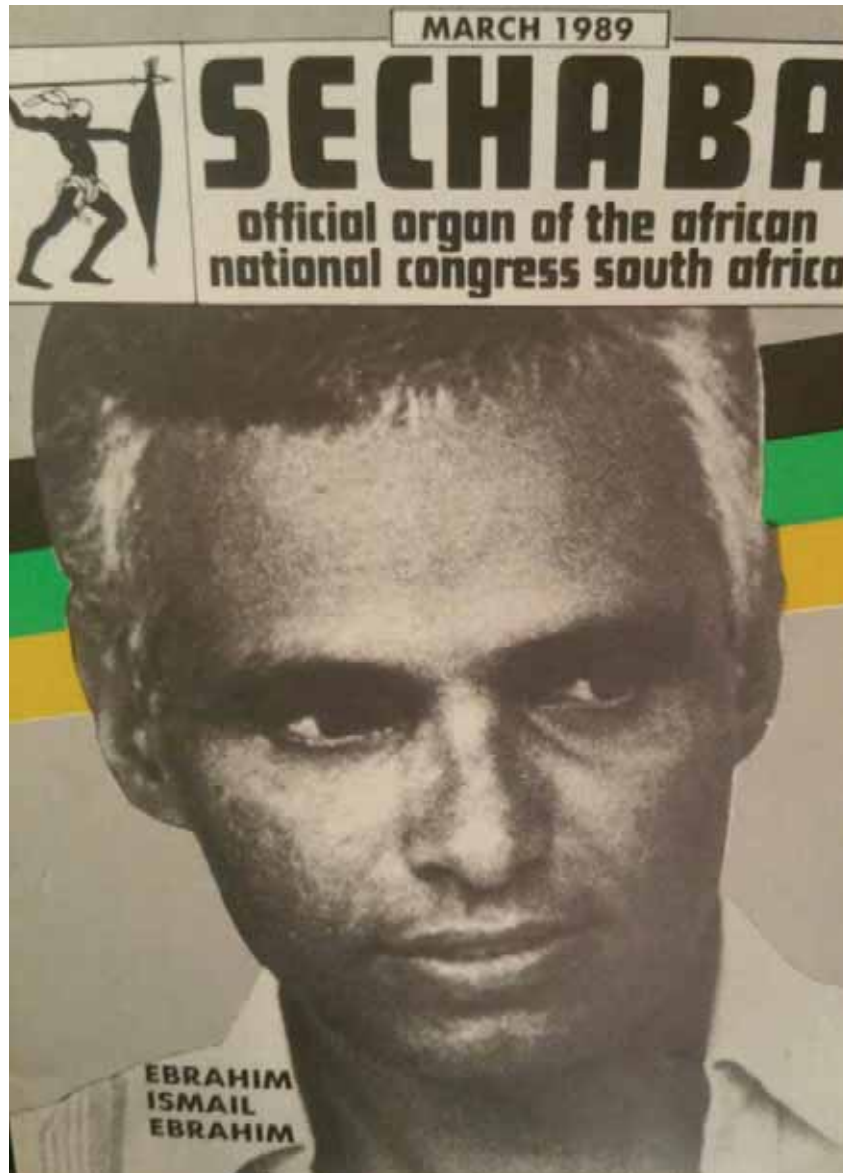
Moe and Yunus were kept in solitary confinement for nine months from June 1985, and were severely tortured in order to extract information about Ebrahim's whereabouts and details of their unit. They never spoke. Lambie Rasool suffered a stroke as a result of his detention and his wife, Kay, died of a heart attack while he and the Shaik sons were in detention. Moe and Yunus attended their mother's funeral in shackles.

Pravin's unit hid Ebrahim in the basement of a house in Reservoir Hills, where he was kept day and night with one of the comrades bringing him food.

It was only after a month that Pravin's unit was able to smuggle him out of the country to Swaziland.

Given the security situation, Ebrahim had to spend the next six months travelling to Lusaka and Zimbabwe, where he spent time with Phyllis Naidoo.

# Abduction from Swaziland



*Ebrahim on the cover of the ANC's 'Sechaba' publication in March 1989.*

For Ebrahim to have returned to Swaziland in 1986 was like walking into a lion's den. He was stubborn and fearless to a fault. He convinced the ANC headquarters in Lusaka that it was necessary for him to remain on the frontline during those very challenging times for the ANC in exile. Ebrahim rented a house in the hilly area of Pine Valley and had a Swazi helper staying with him, along with two Alsatian dogs.

Despite the immense danger Ebrahim had put himself in he never carried a weapon for protection. He was all stealth and political craft and continued operating in secret, dispensing funds to the various underground units, holding underground meetings at night and giving instructions.

In September 1986, South African agents kidnapped Glory Sedibe - one of the MK members operating under Gebuza in Swaziland, who went by the alias "September". He was subjected to severe torture and broke after 18 hours, divulging to the police extensive details about the underground structures operating in Swaziland. This led to a new wave of raids and assassinations in Swaziland.

On 12 December 1986, Ebrahim returned from an all-night meeting to receive a call from Lindiwe Sisulu. Notably shaken, she relayed to him that his close friend and comrade, Shadrack Maphumulo, who had been on Robben Island with Ebrahim and was living in Mbabane, had been shot and killed in front of his children by apartheid agents. A number of others were also abducted. The dragnet of the apartheid security forces was again closing in.

Just a few days later on the night of 15 December, there was a knock at Ebrahim's front door in Pine Valley. Two armed African men held up Ebrahim and his helper, announcing that they worked for the South African Police. The men threatened

to kill them if they made a noise. He and the helper were immediately tied up with rope and they proceeded to take a number of documents and money from the house. Ebrahim was then gagged, blindfolded and made to lie down in the back seat of his own car and driven to the Oshoek border post.

Ebrahim was then forced out of the car and made to walk down an incline and cross the border fence into South Africa. From there his captors handed him over to South African intelligence agents who spoke in thick Afrikaans accents. They handcuffed him, put him in leg irons and proceeded to drive him to Pretoria.

They arrived at the security police headquarters - the Compol building - on the afternoon of 16 December. It was a particularly symbolic day as it was the day that MK had been launched in 1961. As Ebrahim entered the Compol building he was met by Brigadier Schoon who asked, "How do you like having been abducted on December 16th?"

*Ebrahim was then forced out of the car and made to walk down an incline and cross the border fence into South Africa. From there his captors handed him over to South African intelligence agents who spoke in thick Afrikaans accents. They handcuffed him, put him in leg irons and proceeded to drive him to Pretoria.*

# Detention and Torture



*A bird behind bars inside a prison. Photo: Benny Gool/ Oryx Media*

**B**rigadier JH Cronje, Commanding Officer of the Security Branch in the Northern Transvaal, informed Ebrahim that he was being detained under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act. That night he was transferred to the Pretoria maximum security prison and kept there until 9 January 1987, when he was transferred to John Vorster Square. On the first day they attempted to interrogate him but failed as Ebrahim refused to answer any questions. He demanded to be sent back to Swaziland as he had been abducted.

The man who led his torture was the notorious Nic Deetlefs, who said to him, "I am going to do something to you which, if you survive, is going to convince me you are not human." In a note that Ebrahim smuggled out of prison he documented his torture as follows:

"On 13 January 1987, I was put in a special cell with no daylight and little air. I was then exposed to sharp, piercing noises and sounds 24 hours a day. It was mental torture. After a number of days I was a mental and nervous wreck. I felt I was going off my head. I feel I shall not mentally survive this torture and what is due to come.

There are times I feel my mind is cracking. Up to date I have refused to give a single piece of information. I am refusing to answer any question. I shall maintain that stand no matter what the consequences will be. I'd rather go to my grave than betray one single person or organisation."

This form of torture is known as sensory deprivation, a well tried and tested method with the objective of reducing a human to lunacy. Initially, the torture went on for five days until he was seen by the Inspector of Detainees to whom he complained about the torture. Interestingly, before he was taken to see the Inspector, the cell became very quiet. The

Inspector wanted to see the cell and was surprised that it was constructed in a manner unlike the other cells in the police station. He then instructed that Ebrahim be immediately removed and put in a normal cell where the windows were not blocked. Ebrahim began recovering for a while until one night when the noise came again, which deprived him of sleep. This went on for a further seven days at which point his nerves cracked and he became extremely nervous and destabilised so that he could not eat, drink or lie down.

The doctor who arrived every Thursday to see all the detainees recommended that Ebrahim be taken to the hospital for psychiatric observation. To prevent Ebrahim from going to the hospital, Deetlefs drove him to Pretoria prison saying, "We are not finished with you yet." In Pretoria he was seen by a psychiatrist who prescribed him medication that enabled him to recover.

It was there that he recorded his torture on a piece of toilet paper, made a string out of a plastic bag and lowered the note down to the prisoners in the cells below. The note made its way to his lawyer, Priscilla Jana, in Johannesburg, and its contents were published in the local and international media. Until then, Ebrahim had virtually disappeared and it was the first time his comrades and family came to know of his whereabouts and condition. Ebrahim's brother, Essop, brought an application before the court demanding that his detention be declared unlawful and that the police be restrained from further interrogating him.

At no time during his interrogation was Ebrahim accused of being involved in any armed activities. In fact he was in no way linked to planning or executing armed activities in South Africa.

# Tried for High Treason



*After being tried for high treason, Ebrahim found himself serving a second sentence on Robben Island.  
Photo: Zaakirah Vadi/Ahmed Kathrada Foundation*

Following Ebrahim's detention under Section 29 of the Internal Security Act, he was charged with high treason in May 1987. The South African press widely reported that Ebrahim was one of the most senior ANC members to be convicted of treason since the famous Rivonia trial of the 1960s. He was brought to court on 3 August 1987, although he refused to acknowledge the right of the court to try him as he had been abducted from a foreign country. He was also carrying an Indian passport at the time. The trial was initially held in Bethal to make it difficult for Ebrahim's family and comrades to attend. It was later moved to the Supreme Court in Pretoria.

The state wanted to make the case that Ebrahim was directing military activities in the country, which would carry a heavy sentence, potentially the death sentence. It, therefore, linked him to the case of two other accused – Simon Dladla and Mandla Maseko – who had been awaiting trial since July 1986. The two ANC cadres were charged with the explosion of landmines along the border in what was then the Eastern Transvaal. The state wanted to make the case that Ebrahim had issued the orders to plant the landmines and therefore was responsible for the 16 wounded as a result of the explosions.

The claims of the state mainly rested on the false testimony of X1, or "September", the ANC cadre who had been taken from Swaziland and betrayed his comrades by working for the security police. The defense argued that Ebrahim couldn't possibly have given the orders as he didn't have any military task of any kind within the ANC. The defense then applied for evidence of the policy and structures of the ANC to be taken from the ANC itself.

The trial was then moved in September to a secret location

in London to hear evidence from senior members of the ANC leadership in exile. This was unprecedented in South African jurisprudence. When the proceedings were reported to the South African press, it was the first time that the voice of the ANC's National Executive Committee had been publicly and legally heard since the ANC was banned.

John Nkadimeng and Jacob Zuma testified that Ebrahim was not involved in military work in Swaziland and said it was "unthinkable he could have given a military command". Ronnie Kasrils had produced his passport that proved he had been in London at the time "September" claimed he and Ebrahim had met in Swaziland, where Ebrahim supposedly gave military orders. During cross questioning Kasrils said,

"It is well known to us that Ebrahim was kidnapped by the South African police, clearly tortured by people who are well known to us, and will pay for their crimes when South Africa is free. That is as sure as the sun comes up in the east and sets in the west." Kasrils made the statement while staring at Nic Deetlefs. As it happens, Deetlefs never applied for amnesty from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and is currently living as a free man in Johannesburg.

On 4 July, one of three key defense witnesses who could have proven Ebrahim's innocence was shot dead. The two other witnesses had already been murdered. Paul Dikeledi, head of the ANC's Transvaal military machinery was shot by apartheid agents in July 1987, and Cassius Make was also killed, thanks to "September". The state brought a number of other witnesses who gave false and contradictory evidence against Ebrahim, all of whom he had never seen before.

The well-known anti-apartheid defense lawyer, Priscilla Jana, was the instructing attorney in Ebrahim's case and

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

Ismail Mohamed (who later became Chief Justice in a free South Africa) was his Senior Counsel. Mohamed made the argument at the heart of the case – that the state had no jurisdiction to try Ebrahim as he had been abducted from a foreign country, which was against international law.

Ebrahim made a lengthy and historic statement to the court before his sentencing.

In it he said:

"I wonder in the future whether freedom fighters should bother to even stand trial... the testimony of secret witnesses of despicable character, who would sell their own soul for a sixpence was preferred over the testimony of respected leaders of our people. If I were to choose my life all over again I would follow the same path. I could never have remained indifferent to the poverty and suffering of our people. I have

a deep commitment for peace, freedom and prosperity for all fellow human beings and have an equal distaste for injustice and oppression."

After 16 months in court, judgement in Ebrahim's trial was handed down in December 1988. All three accused were found guilty. Ebrahim was sentenced to 20 years on Robben Island, Mandela Maseko to 23 years and Simon Dladla to 12 years. Justice Daniels said that he would give Ebrahim a sentence so that when he came out of jail he would be an old man.

He said he was sentencing him to another 20 years on Robben Island as the first 15 years did him no good. Following sentencing the ANC supporters in the gallery broke into shouts of Amandla and freedom songs. As the singing subsided, a state prosecutor in the trial, Louise Van der Walt, shouted "Long live the AWB!"



*Ebrahim in later years consulting with Jacob Zuma, and sitting with Ahmed Kathrada and Nelson Mandela.*



# Lonely Journey Back to Robben Island



*An ANC newsletter of 1989 calling for the freedom of Robben Island's prisoners. Ebrahim is seen pictured second last.*

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

In January 1989, Ebrahim made the lonely journey back to Robben Island, a place he had hoped never to see again. This time he was imprisoned in the isolation section where Mandela had previously been kept. Conditions had significantly improved in that prisoners were not sent to do hard labour in the quarry and had access to television. Ebrahim remembers having watched the 1991 Gulf War on TV with fellow prisoners such as Popo Molefe, Simon Dladla and Ashley Forbes during recreation time. The regime of prison life, especially in the isolation section, was nevertheless a daily hardship. Ebrahim enrolled with UNISA to study for a law degree.

One day in 1989, Ebrahim was told by the warders that he should get ready as he and a few of his comrades were going to be taken by boat to the mainland to meet with Nelson Mandela at Victor Verster Prison. This was an

unexpected and incredible surprise. The last time Ebrahim had seen Mandela was just prior to his release from Robben Island in 1979, when the prison warders had allowed him to greet Madiba in the prison yard before he left prison.

Mandela had been having secret discussions with the apartheid regime and demanded of the authorities that he be allowed to discuss and consult with the political leadership on Robben Island. Ebrahim and a few of his comrades on the Disciplinary Committee on the Island - considered the highest ANC structure - spent an entire day with Mandela in intense discussions. The warder had cooked and they were served lunch and tea by Mandela himself.

Mandela mandated Ebrahim and the three other comrades to discuss the new developments with the rest of the political prisoners on the island and see him again to provide feedback



*Ebrahim collecting his boxes of personal items as he is released from Robben Island on February 27, 1991.*



*Ebrahim being released from Robben Island on February 27, 1991.*



*A welcome dinner for Ebrahim following his release from Robben Island in 1991. Among the guests are Madiba, Walter Sisulu, Amina Cachalia and Ismail Meer.*

on their views. Once back on the Island, Ebrahim and his comrades found means of consulting the other prisoners. There was no doubt that the winds of change were blowing in the country. Ebrahim returned to Victor Verster to report back on the consultative meeting. The whole process was a remarkable turning point.

Throughout Ebrahim's imprisonment his lawyers had taken his case on appeal, arguing against the jurisdiction of the apartheid court to have tried him. On 26 February 1991, Justice Steyn of the Appeal Court in Bloemfontein found that the Transvaal Supreme Court had no legal jurisdiction to try

him and set aside his conviction. Steyn ruled that Ebrahim's apprehension, abduction from Swaziland, transport to South Africa, arrest and detention were in breach of international law, and was therefore unlawful. He said the state had come to the trial with unclean hands and that the sovereignty of other states had to be respected. Four Justices of the Appeal Court concurred with the decision.

The very next day, on 27 February 1991, Ebrahim was released. The date of release is ironic as he had been released from Robben Island previously on 28 February 1979, almost exactly 12 years earlier to the day.

# Revolutionaries Never Retire



*Ebrahim and Madiba following Ebrahim's release from Robben Island.*

For the first time since 1963, Ebrahim was able to walk the streets of South Africa as a free man, unimpeded by banning orders or having to operate secretly underground. He immediately started work at Shell House, the ANC's head office in Johannesburg, as part of the Organising Committee.

Mandela mandated Ebrahim to establish the Patriotic Front - an umbrella formation of all anti-apartheid movements and political parties in the country struggling for a free and democratic state. At the ANC's 48th National Congress in July 1991, Ebrahim was elected onto the National Executive Committee of the ANC and he was elected in seventh place onto the National Working Committee, ANC's most senior decision-making organ.

As South Africa ushered in its first democratic elections in 1994, Ebrahim celebrated with his comrades the fruits of

their incredibly hard years of struggle. In the final analysis, the apartheid state had utterly failed to break their spirit and resolve to bring about a free, non-racial and democratic South Africa. What Ebrahim had fought for from the age of 14 had finally come to pass.

He was sworn in as a Member of Parliament in 1994, and was made Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee on Foreign Affairs. In 2009, he was appointed by President Jacob Zuma as the Deputy Minister of International Relations and he simultaneously held the position of Chairperson of the ANC Sub-committee on International Relations.

Ebrahim's contribution to the struggle for democracy in South Africa has been widely recognized by foreign governments, including the King of Spain, who honored him with a Knighthood in 2015, and the President of India, who



*Ebrahim and Laloo Chiba after Ebrahim was released from Robben Island.*

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presented him in 2014 with the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award. The President of South Africa awarded Ebrahim with the Military Veterans Decoration in Platinum in 2012, in recognition of his sacrifices made to bring about peace,

democracy and freedom in South Africa.

The Platinum Class III Awards were given to veterans who were in the first Regional Command structures of MK.



*Ebrahim speaking on Nelson Mandela Day as a Deputy Minister.*



*Ebrahim with Rivonia Trialist Andrew Mlangeni and Mohammed Bhabha at Ahmed Kathrada's funeral, March 2017. Photo: Benny Gool / Oryx Media*



*Ebrahim as a Member of Parliament outside the National Assembly.*



*Ebrahim taking the oath of office at his swearing in as Deputy Minister of International Relations*



*Ebrahim at his Knighthood by the King of Spain in 2015. In the photo from left to right: Zaida Enver, Fatima Ebrahim, Shannon Ebrahim, Ebrahim, Sarah and Kadin Ebrahim, Spanish Ambassador Juan Carlos, Saleem Ebrahim and Nadia Ebrahim.*



*Ebrahim receiving the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman award from the President of India in 2014.*

# Global Peacemaker



*Ebrahim and Shannon in Palestine meeting with Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, in 2001.*



In the democratic South Africa Ebrahim proved to be more than just a politician and a diplomat. Over time he carved out a niche as a global peacemaker. In 2003, he began his foray into the world of international conflict resolution when as Advisor to Deputy President Jacob Zuma, he provided counsel during Zuma's mediation between the warring parties in Burundi. Ebrahim was at Zuma's side throughout the marathon meetings between the Burundian adversaries. Finally, Zuma's mediation met with unparalleled success – it had succeeded in bringing about peace where 14 international peace processes had failed. From Burundi, Ebrahim moved on to conflict resolution efforts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, again in an official advisory capacity.

Ebrahim then took on a number of peace making roles internationally alongside Roelf Meyer, who had been the chief negotiator for the National Party government in 1993. They make a dynamic duo as they were able to share the South African experience of compromise and reconciliation with sworn enemies engaged in protracted conflicts around the globe. Meyer had been the Deputy Minister of Law

and Order at the time when Ebrahim was abducted from Swaziland, but today they are good friends. The first theatre of conflict they tackled together was the civil war in Sri Lanka, where they attempted shuttle diplomacy and mediation between the Tamil Tigers and the Sri Lankan government over the course of seven years. The efforts to consolidate peace in Sri Lanka are still continuing. In 2008, Ebrahim was involved in peace efforts in Nepal during the crisis between the people and the monarchy, which threatened to devolve into civil conflict.

In 2014, Ebrahim joined Roelf Meyer, Mohammed Bhabha and Ivor Jenkins as one of the four Directors of In Transformation Initiative, which supports and advises on peace processes around the world. The conflict resolution processes that Ebrahim has been actively involved in include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, finding common ground between the plethora of Palestinian political movements, forging peace between the government of Colombia and the FARC rebels, and brokering dialogue between political adversaries in Madagascar and Zimbabwe.



*Ebrahim addressing the UN as Deputy Minister of International Relations.*



*Ebrahim and Roelf Meyer with Bolivian President Evo Morales.*

## Family Life

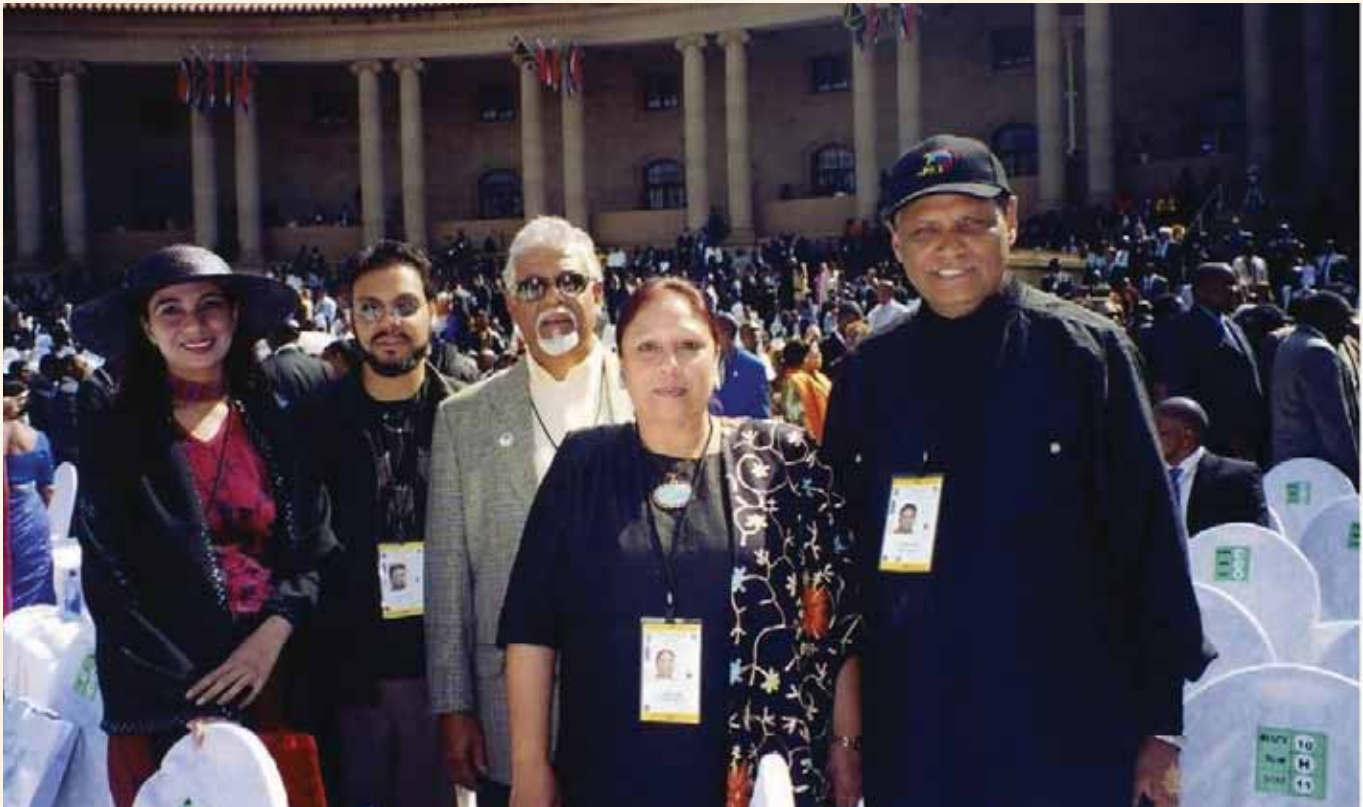


*Ebrahim and his wife Shannon.*

The one aspect of freedom which Ebrahim had sorely missed for most of his life was having his own family. Mandela used to joke that if Ebrahim was ever to get married, the woman would probably have to propose to him as he was unflinchingly married to the struggle. Ebrahim had never planned to get married but at the age of 62 he fell in love with Shannon Field, a South African living in Canada, who is 35 years his junior.

They met in parliament when she was presenting a study on the reform of the UN to MPs while Ebrahim was the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. Their paths crossed again in 1999, when she travelled to South Africa as the Advisor to the Canadian Secretary of State for Africa. It did not take long for Ebrahim to convince her to move back to South Africa, a suggestion that Madiba had made to her some years before.

On 25 September 2004, Ebrahim and Shannon married, and within a few years were proud parents of Sarah and Kadin. At the age of 80 Ebrahim is enjoying the abundant energy of an eight and ten year old.



*Ebrahim with his brother Essop, sister in law Fatima, nephew Saleem and his wife Nadia at Thabo Mbeki's inauguration.*

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Ebrahim and his brother Essop in Lenasia post 1991.



Ebrahim and his two sisters, Fatima and Ayesha, in Swaziland around 1984.

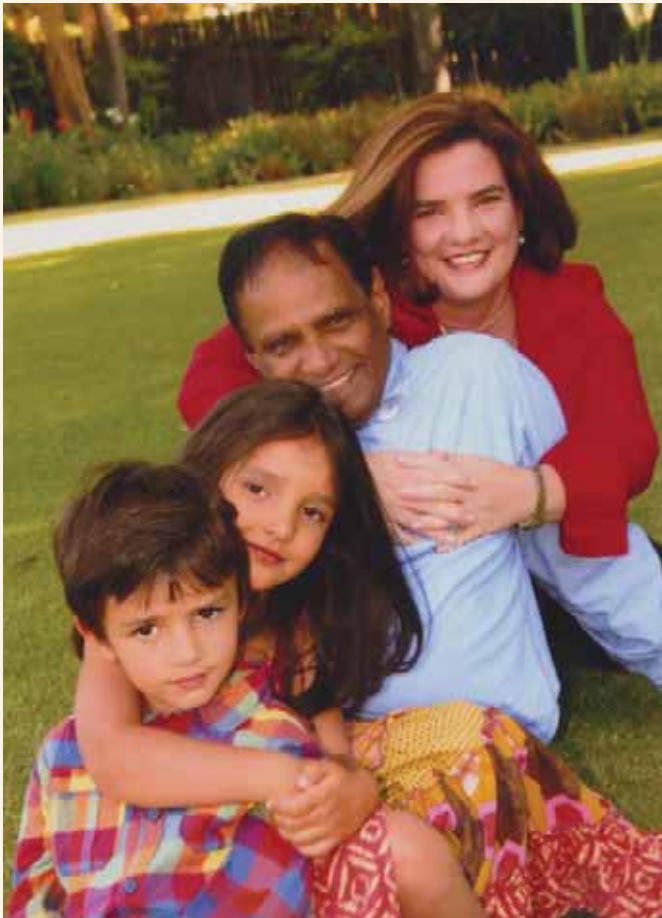


Ebrahim and Shannon with Madiba.



Ebrahim and his brother Gora.

In many ways life came full circle for Ebrahim despite all the odds. The ANC, the movement to which he was wedded his entire life, finally achieved freedom. The country is in the process of transforming to a non-racial democracy and in the twilight of his life, he also created his very own family. Ebrahim's life has been one very well lived. His immense contribution to the struggle will always be remembered by his comrades, the country and most especially his young children.



*Ebrahim and Shannon with their children Sarah and Kadin.*



*Ebrahim hiking with Sarah and Kadin in Cape Town, April 2017.  
Photo: Zaakirah Vadi/Ahmed Kathrada Foundation*

## Extracts from the Court Statement of Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim



*Ebrahim at a Dirco press conference as Deputy Minister of International Relations.*

"We commit ourselves to a ceaseless struggle for the establishment of a fully democratic, non-racial and free and prosperous society in our country.

We stand firmly opposed to all forms of racial discrimination, national oppression and the exploitation of the wealth of our country for the benefit of a selected few.

I am classified by the South African racial laws as an Indian South African. My parents brought me up to be proud of my language and my culture. As a Muslim child, I was schooled in Islamic prayers and in the reading of the Holy Qur'aan. As children, we learnt of the struggles and the wars of jihad waged by the Holy Prophet of Islam against the oppressive and decadent social order of his time. We grew up listening to the call of the *muezzin* from the minaret five times a day, declaring to the world the universality of humankind.

We learnt something also of the non-violent passive resistance struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi at the turn of the century and directed against the racial laws of the Boer and British colonial administrations."

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"I actively participated in the organising of meetings and in the collection of the demands of the people from their homes and their places of work. I was elected a delegate to the Congress of the People held at Kliptown on June 25 and 26, 1955. At this Congress, with some 3,000 delegates present - blacks and whites, workers and peasants, businessmen and intellectuals, youths and students, the young and the old, Christians, Hindus, Muslims and Jews - we discussed the clauses of the Charter and adopted it as a guide to a free, just and prosperous South Africa. At this historic gathering we swore to struggle until we ended all forms of oppression, until we ended the poverty and exploitation of our people...

No political party among the white ruling classes has ever since produced a programme of principles that matches the Freedom Charter in its non-racialism, in its democratic ideals. The government regarded our declaration for a free and peaceful South Africa as an act of high treason."

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"As Commander-in-Chief Comrade Mandela called on the people to join Umkhonto and warned that there was no easy road to freedom. To achieve liberation and justice we must be prepared to sacrifice our homes, our loved ones and even our own lives. That is why, in the short history of our armed struggle many freedom fighters have fallen to the guns of the apartheid state, thousands found themselves in apartheid prisons and thousands more were forced into exile, even there to be pursued and murdered, by the evil forces of apartheid. Many combatants were sent to the gallows."

## EBRAHIM ISMAIL EBRAHIM - A Gentle Revolutionary

"I served the whole of my 15 years' imprisonment without a day's remission in Robben Island Prison. For 15 years I was not permitted to see a Muslim religious worker and was not even allowed a copy of the Holy Qur'aan. If the prison authorities intended to break the backbone of political prisoners, it has in reality achieved the exact opposite. I was released from prison in 1979 only to be banned and heavily restricted. I was prevented from entering any work place or seeking employment in a factory or in a place of education. I was under constant police harassment and found it difficult to live a normal life. In 1980 I left South Africa illegally and went into exile. Abroad, I was once again welcomed into the ranks of the ANC and continued to serve my organisation and my people."

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"Our struggle arises from the very nature of the South African society and places on us an inherent right and duty to overthrow this system of usurpation and racial tyranny. We could not have taken any other road. Our method of struggle has always been determined by the scope created by the ruling government of the country. We have always regarded ourselves as an intrinsic part of the world-wide anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic movement. This history of our organisation has, therefore, closely followed the pattern of the anti-colonial struggles in other parts of the world."

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"As black citizens of this country we are instructed by one experience. This is an experience of deliberate and systematic oppression, absolute despotism, degradation and denial of our very humanity. This experience obliges us to conclude that the regimes which have ruled our country for 40 years now have, as a matter of policy, based themselves outside the parameters of such human thought and activity as can be considered moral, humane and just. To throw off such governments, as we must surely try, is to stand on the side of morality, human decency and justice."

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"The Freedom Charter is to us like a lodestar which beckons us to the goal of genuine emancipation and happiness of all our people, both black and white. If ever an opportunity arose for freedom and justice in our country to be brought about by peaceful means and for peace to be achieved by peaceful means, we should seize the opportunity with both hands. Genuine peace and freedom must recognise that if South Africa claims to be an independent state, it is one in which the majority of the people have never enjoyed independence. It must recognise the national liberation content of our struggle and aim at the restoration of usurped land and wealth, and an end to national humiliation in all its forms and an affirmation of the culture and personality of the rightless majority."

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“But we know who it is that we and the rest of the freedom-loving people of our country have to fight to turn into reality the dream of a South Africa that shall belong to all the people, both black and white. We have brushed shoulders with the angels of death who guard the king and princes that occupy the apartheid throne. In their hands they carry the gun, the hangman's noose and vile instruments of torture. We know that the throne they defend can only stand if it is surrounded by a moat of human suffering...

“As we leave this building to go wherever this court decides, we wish to say to our people, we tried to carry out your behests. We did our best to live up to what you expected of us as members of the ANC. There are countless others like us who are prepared to sacrifice their very lives to achieve the noble goal of the emancipation of our country. We shall achieve victory soon!”

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“I have been actively involved in the struggle for liberation for over 36 years. I spent about half that period in prison. My life has been one of struggle for peace and natural justice, for a common humanity and a struggle against the greatest single evil of this century, the evil of racism. If I were to choose my life all over again I would follow the same path. I could never have remained indifferent to the poverty and suffering of our people.

“I have a deep commitment for peace, freedom and prosperity for all my fellow human beings and have an equal distaste for injustice and oppression.”



*Ebrahim with Robben Island in the background.  
Photo: Zaakirah Vadi/Ahmed Kathrada Foundation*

## EPILOGUE

The life story of Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, or simply “Ebie” as he is known to his friends, is one that has for too long been promised to be told. For years comrades have been asking that his very dramatic story be committed to paper so that future generations of South Africans will know the lengths to which our veterans sacrificed their own personal freedom so that our children would be free.

This booklet serves only as a snapshot of Ebrahim’s lifelong contribution to the struggle against the apartheid system, and his later contribution to reconciliation and peace around the globe. It is a story of self-sacrifice, bravery, determination and commitment to the cause of the African National Congress – to bring about a free and non-racial South Africa, which belongs to all who live in it.

The fact that so many know so little about the details of Ebie’s life is a testament to his own humility. He has never gone on speaking tours about his experiences or sensationalised his story. If anything, he has always taken a back seat and paid tribute to the sacrifices of others. It is his story and his amazing humility that makes him a true South African hero.

It is in honour of his 80th birthday that the Kathrada Foundation decided to pay tribute to his contribution, although we know the vivid account of his life is still to come in the form of an autobiography in which he shares his very personal anecdotes about his life in the struggle. His memoirs have been a work in progress for too long but the project is almost at its end.



Ebie’s journey has been a truly inspirational one and throughout the course of his life he has seemed to be a man without fear. There was never anything that stood in his way as he always said he knew victory was certain. For as long as I have known him he loved to quote the thinker Nikolai Ostrovsky who once said:

“Man’s dearest possession is life. It is given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past; so live that, dying, he might say: all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world – the fight for the liberation of mankind.”

Ebie’s life leaves no room for regrets, as he has lived every moment of his life in the pursuance of a higher purpose. After decades of struggle he lived to see the liberation of his country, his children were born into freedom and he never compromised his principles.

In the twilight of his life Ebrahim is continuing a struggle of a different kind – to bridge the divide between people who have only ever seen each other as enemies. The verse “blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God” applies to him.

Thank you for the endless sacrifices you have made and for being the eternally generous and quiet soul that makes you the giant that you are.

*Shannon Ebrahim*

1 July 2017





AhmedKathrada  
F o u n d a t i o n  

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Deepening Non-Racialism

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