

SOME NOTES ON SELBY MSIMANG AND THE FOUNDING OF THE ANC.

by Peter Brown

January 1982 marked the 70th Anniversary of the founding of the organisation which later became the ANC.

There is only one person alive today who was present at that founding meeting, which was convened in Bloemfontein on January 12th, 1912, and which lasted for four days. He is Mr. H. Selby Msimang, who lives at Edendale, near Pietermaritzburg, and who turned 95 on December 13th, 1981. Apart from many other activities in which he still engages, Mr. Msimang has been a member of the board of Reality since it was founded.

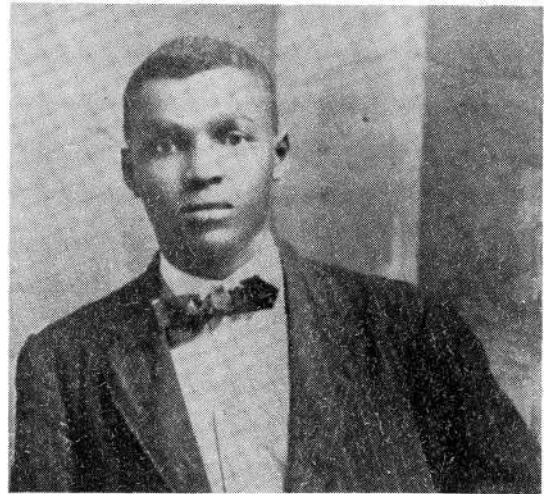
The man who inspired the 1912 conference was Dr. Pixley ka Isaka Seme, an advocate practising in Johannesburg. Dr. Seme had been adopted by the Rev. Pixley of the American Board Mission and taken by him to be educated in America. He completed his studies there at Columbia University and then went on to Oxford, before returning to South Africa. He opened his legal office in Johannesburg and enrolled Selby Msimang as his clerk.

The African people had been dismayed by the concessions made to the defeated Boer Republics during the first decade of the century and their dismay turned to a profound sense of betrayal when, in the negotiations preceding Union, they found the Boers included and themselves excluded. They saw the Union as a simple ganging-up against them by white South Africa. In Seme's view the only possible response to this situation was to try to bring black South Africans together in one body to counter any attempts by the new white bloc to reduce their rights and status.

In collaboration with Sol Plaatje, the writer, then living in Kimberley, Seme invited to the conference leading figures from all four provinces and from the Protectorates. Some six hundred people attended. They were all men ... although not long after the conference a women's section of the movement was established under the leadership of Mrs. Maxeke, another person who had been educated in America. People at the conference who made a specially deep impression on the young Msimang were S. M. Makgatho of Pretoria, a retired Kilnerton teacher, Sol Plaatje, and Thomas Mapikela of Bloemfontein. Of the traditional leaders who made important contributions he recalls Chief Mantsioea of the Barolong, from Thaba Nchu, Chief Maama of Basutoland, and Prince Malunga of Swaziland, uncle of the present King Sobhuza.

The conference formed the S.A. Native National Congress whose membership was restricted to Africans and whose principal aim was to be the eradication of tribalism and the instilling in every black man the idea that he was first and foremost an African and only secondly a tribesman.

To create the framework within which these aims would be pursued a constitutional committee was elected whose task it was to draw up a constitution for the new organisation after the adjournment of the conference. Its convenor was to be Richard Msimang, Selby's elder brother, another lawyer. Richard's clerk at the time was Selope Thema, another name to become famous in the struggle for African rights. Sol Plaatje was elected secretary of the Constitutional Committee, but as he was living in Kimberley and most of the Committee's



Selby Msimang in 1912

work took place in Johannesburg, Selby Msimang became his Johannesburg based assistant. Another prominent figure in the Constitutional Committee was Saul Msane whose roots, like Selby's, lay in Edendale, but who was then working on the Jubilee Mine in Johannesburg.

Seme, who had been so prominent in the calling of the conference, was strangely not elected to any office in the new organisation. He was a member of its executive but the Presidency went to Dr. J. L. Dube, who had not been able to attend the Bloemfontein gathering, and the vice-Presidency to S. M. Makgatho.

Selby Msimang continued his association with the SANNC and later the ANC until its banning. He became its provincial secretary in Natal in the election which brought Chief Albert Luthuli to his first important post in the organisation, that of Natal Provincial President. From 1953, when he helped found the non-racial Liberal Party of South Africa, Selby Msimang devoted most of his political energies to that organisation, but his membership of the ANC continued and his contacts with it remained close. The energy he devoted to the Liberal Party was such that it earned him a banning order when he was in his late seventies and a prison sentence, for forgetting to make the weekly report to the police station which that banning order required of him, when he was nearly 80.

And even when the Liberal Party was closed down by the Improper Interference Act, and when he had reached an age when most people had long since retired, his fight for right and justice continued. Last year, shortly before his 95th birthday, he went with me to meet a delegation of people ejected from Charlestown who were having great difficulty in re-establishing themselves in the area of Kwa-Zulu to which they had been removed. His response? To offer to lead a deputation to see the relevant Kwa-Zulu Minister at Ulundi. To travel to Ulundi from Edendale and back again in a day is no small undertaking for a man in the prime of his life. It never seemed to occur to Selby Msimang, at the age of 95, that duty no longer required it of him.

The spirit of 1912 lives on in Selby Msimang in 1982, as it no doubt does in a great many other people whose association with the organisation he helped found has been much more recent than his. □