

Opposing apartheid in the Pietermaritzburg region

05 Nov 2009

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In the struggle for black rights in South Africa, Pietermaritzburg is probably best known to the world as the place where Gandhi was thrown off a train for sitting in a seat reserved for whites - an experience which changed the course of his life and sowed in his mind the seeds from which grew his policy of satyagraha, perhaps the noblest strategy for political emancipation the world has seen.

The Gandhi incident was an exceptional and dramatic event, but the fight to preserve what rights black people had, and to win those others which were theirs by right, has been carried on in and around Pietermaritzburg since that day in less spectacular fashion by many other individuals and organizations.

Right: Blatant petty apartheid signs have disappeared from the City, though the fundamentals of apartheid are still entrenched.

On 13 December 1886, seven years before the train incident, Selby Msimang was born at Edendale. He died on 29 March 1982.

Most of Msimang's middle years were spent out of Natal. For instance, he was living in Johannesburg in 1912 when he was one of those who helped found the predecessor to the African National Congress, the South African Native Congress. It was in Bloemfontein that he

was arrested in 1917 for leading a strike of municipal workers. In the Cape he helped Clements Kadalie launch the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union in 1920, and was elected its first President. But Edendale and Pietermaritzburg remained his home and to there he returned to become election agent for Edgar Brookes, another great local fighter for black rights, when he decided to stand as Natives' Representative for Natal in 1937. Selby himself was elected one of the Natal members of the Natives' Representative Council and was present when Dr Verwoerd abolished it. He was actively engaged in the ANC in Natal and was one of the group which sponsored Chief Luthuli for the Presidency of the Natal Branch of the ANC. Later he went as a Pietermaritzburg delegate to the meeting in 1953 at which the Liberal Party was launched, became chairman of its Edendale Branch and served on its provincial and national committees up to the time that the Improper Interference Act forced it to close in 1968. Still later he joined Inkatha, hoping that it would establish a working arrangement with the ANC, in spite of his fundamental objection to the latter's armed struggle.

Other important African political figures were the Gumedes, whose home for many years was in New Scotland Road, off College Road. James Gumede, who was part of the 1919 ANC



delegation to Great Britain seeking the repeal of the Natives Land Act of 1913, was elected President of the Congress in 1927. During his term of office he visited Moscow and formed a close working arrangement with the Communist Party. This led to considerable strain between him and some of his ANC colleagues, particularly as at that time the Communist Party was advocating the creation of an 'Independent Native Republic'. The result was that Gumede was challenged at the 1930 presidential elections by the ANC's founder, Dr Seme, and defeated. But that was not the last to be heard of the family. Archie, son of James, was born in the City in 1914 at 5 George Street. The family soon moved to 400 Berg Street, to a house owned by Joe Soobiah, Maritzburg's famous 'potato king', and in 1921 to New Scotland Road, where they remained until the Group Areas Act evicted them.

The young Gumede was soon active in ANC affairs, becoming secretary of the local branch under the chairmanship of A. B. Majola. Mr Majola, former manager of the Umgungundhlovu Co-op, now lives at Imbali, another victim of the Group Areas Act, which drove him there from his home in the now-forgotten freehold area of Maryvale, on the outskirts of town off the Wartburg road. Archie Gumede went on to become assistant secretary of the Natal ANC under M. B. Yengwa, and was very active in the Pietermaritzburg area in the build-up to the Congress of the People. He later faced charges for this action in the Treason Trial, the case against him eventually collapsing, as it did in every other case. Now he has emerged, after numerous bannings and detentions, as a President of the United Democratic Front. Remarkably, his experiences at the hands of the Government have left him quite unembittered and, despite pressures from friend and foe alike, totally opposed to violence.



Personalities at the Natal Convention. 1961.

Other important figures in the Pietermaritzburg ANC, and later in the 1950s and 1960s in the South African Congress of Trade Unions in the Pietermaritzburg area, were Moses Mabhida and Harry Gwala. The former has recently died in exile; the latter is serving a life sentence. Both the Natal Indian Organization and the Natal Indian Congress were active in Pietermaritzburg up until

the 1960s. Then the NIO began slowly to wither away when its moderate stance was challenged on account of its failure to halt the advance of apartheid and particularly the application of the Group Areas Act in the Pietermaritzburg area. The NIO represented primarily the commercial interests in the City. Its leading figure was S. R. Naidoo, who had his offices in Chancery Lane, and who was highly regarded even by his critics in the Indian community, and certainly by many other Pietermaritzburg citizens, white and black.

The NIC drew to it the more radical members of the Indian community, particularly young professionals and trade unionists. Its first post-Second World War campaign was the Passive Resistance Campaign against the Smuts Pegging Act, forerunner of today's Group Areas Act. Initially only five volunteers could be found in the whole of Pietermaritzburg. They were Suthie Mungal, a tailor by trade but at that time involved in the Municipal Workers' Union; L. T. Ramdeen; Naicker of Eddels; S. B. Maharaj and G. R Naidoo, son-in-law of 'S.R' of the Natal Indian Organization. They formed themselves into a Passive Resistance Council and at a meeting at Sutherlands Tannery, Plessislaer, where S. B. Maharaj was employed, launched (with the permission of the owners) their appeal for volunteers. At this and subsequent meetings, 120 volunteers were recruited. They were sent in batches to Durban where they set up camp in Gale Street. There the police, who had been warned in advance, arrested them. They were sentenced to 30 days in gaol, 7 days of which would be remitted for good behaviour - a far cry from the treatment they could expect today.

Pietermaritzburg provided no volunteers for the Defiance Campaign of 1952, but later in the 1950s the NIC in the City was heavily involved in the preliminaries to the Congress of the People and in anti-Group Areas Act agitation. A Congress of the People Committee, jointly chaired by Dr Chota Motala and Archie Gumede, with Messrs Mungal and Mabhida as secretaries, was set up. Their campaign led to a delegation of 30 being sent to the Congress, and to Archie Gumede and Chota Motala being charged with treason. The Group Areas campaign persisted throughout the decade and on into the early 1960s. It led to a remarkable degree of co-operation between the Congress Alliance, the Liberal Party and the Black Sash in the Pietermaritzburg region. From Pietermaritzburg this campaign was extended into the outlying areas of the Midlands and Northern Natal. Weekend protest meetings were almost a weekly event. Dr Motala was not often missing as a speaker, and would be joined by ANC speakers and by some Liberal Party representative such as Alan Paton, Leo Kuper or Ken Hill. This co-operation spilled over into other fields. In 1959 a massive protest meeting against the banning of Chief Luthuli filled the City Hall to overflowing. It was the most spectacular of many such joint meetings and demonstrations during the 1950s and early 1960s, in which the Progressive Party later joined.

In 1961 the Natal Convention was held at the University. Initiated at another mass meeting in the City Hall, presided over by Archbishop Denis Hurley and chaired by Dr Edgar Brookes, it brought together as wide a variety of political views at one gathering - from United Party supporters to Congressites - as Natal had ever seen. They managed a surprising degree of agreement, even the unanimous acceptance of the aim of universal suffrage on a common role. One of the consequences of the Convention was the drawing for the first time of members of the Pietermaritzburg coloured community into the mainstream of South African anti-apartheid politics. Most of them were ex-servicemen active in the local branch of the British Ex-

Servicemen's League, which eschewed political involvement. But led by Dempsey Noel, a local plasterer, they began to involve themselves in other organizations, notably the Liberal Party and the Coloured Convention Movement.

Later in 1961, Edendale provided the venue for the meeting of the All-In African Conference, where Nelson Mandela emerged from a recently-expired ban to make one of his last important speeches as a free man. The Non-European Unity Movement, notably through the Christopher and Hassim families, and its successor the African People's Democratic Union of South Africa (APDUSA), have been active and vocal in Pietermaritzburg politics for many years. The Azanian People's Organization (AZAPO), the heir to Steve Biko's Black Peoples Convention, also made its presence felt in the Pietermaritzburg area, though it has been greatly eclipsed since the rise of the United Democratic Front (UDF). Inkatha has become a real force to be reckoned with in local black politics, since the resurrection of this Zulu cultural organization as a political movement with wider and national ambitions. Many members of the Congress Movement, their organization shattered by the bannings of the 1950s and 1960s, have found a new home in the UDF. Archie Gumede was on the platform at its Natal launch at Edendale, and Dr D. V. and Mr A. S. Chetty, who were leading figures in the Natal Indian Congress (NIC), are now in the UDF.

The declaration of the 1986 State of Emergency had a grievous impact on organizations and individuals associated with the UDF, with over 950 people detained in the Pietermaritzburg region over an eighteen-month period. The trauma of the 1986 and 1987 emergencies was heightened by the seemingly continuous fratricidal conflict between 'vigilantes', alleged to be the agents of Inkatha, and the UDF and radical youth. The bloodletting reached horrifying proportions in 1987 and the first two months of 1988 with over 550 people killed for political reasons in the Natal Midlands, the majority of those whose political affiliation could be identified being supporters of the UDF. Peace negotiations between Inkatha and the UDF/COSATU alliance started in late 1987 brought little respite and there was growing anxiety at the State's evident unwillingness to take legal action against vigilante 'warlords'. Detentions were equally one-sided with 754 detentions of UDF and COSATU supporters in 1987 but no Inkatha members. In February 1988 the UDF and a number of other organizations were effectively banned.

It is over a hundred years since Selby Msimang was born, and very nearly a hundred since Mohandas Gandhi was unceremoniously bundled off that train onto our station platform. In that time the individuals and organizations of this City, which have fought for full rights for all its citizens in a non-racial South Africa, have acquitted themselves with considerable credit in different circumstances. It is a sad fact that this record has in the past few years been marred by a dangerous factionalism and violence, where opponents of the Government spend more time fighting each other than it. The politics of non-racialism could do no greater service to South Africa and Pietermaritzburg in its 150th year than by recreating the broad spirit of co-operation against apartheid which was such a feature of the City in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There is the real challenge for 1988.