

THE LEAST DRAMATIC CONTRIBUTION

Albie Sachs

Of all the people on the scene at the time, I think I can lay claim to having made the least dramatic contribution towards the launching of MK.

I was an advocate in Cape Town, and one day a comrade whom I had frequently defended appeared at my "chambers", closed the door behind him, and bent down as if to tie his shoelaces. Dipping his fingers in his sock, he pulled out a tightly folded piece of paper and said: "Can you keep this for a little while, someone will call for it?"

Some while later, I was back at my desk working through some law reports, the slip of paper securely tucked in my sock, when another comrade appeared. This time I bent down as if to tie my laces, pulled at the piece of paper and handed it to him; he of course, in turn bent down as if to tie his laces.... and the piece of paper was soon on its way out into the corridor down the lift and into the street. Only afterwards did I learn, or, rather, guess from something which someone had let slip, that that piece of paper had contained the MK oath, and that I had done my bit towards the launching of armed struggle in South Africa.

I was in my mid twenties then, part of a generation that had grown up politically in the golden decade of the 1950s. We had taken part as youth in the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People and the national work stoppage after Sharpeville. Often, during these years we had asked older comrades to explain to us 'from a theoretical point of view' how it was possible to believe in a non-violent end to apartheid, let alone to capitalism in South Africa (we were all socialists, and came to nationalism through socialism, just as a different generation today is coming to socialism through nationalism).

Our older comrades resolutely defended the possibility of peaceful change, if the people, especially the workers, were sufficiently mobilised, and if the world took a strong enough stand, then it was possible to destroy apartheid and build a new society peacefully. The fact is that at that time, when the ANC was legal

and could lead mass campaigns without serious repression, when papers like Guardian could openly express the people's wishes, the masses were not in a mood nor were they physically prepared for armed confrontation with the regime. It was the State of Emergency and the banning of the ANC in 1960 that convinced us all, not theoretically, but in practice, that new forms of struggle had to be found.

The Stayaway Campaign of 1961, timed to coincide with the declaration of South Africa as a racist republic, was the last attempt at using mass pressure on its own. We threw everything into it, but with meetings, newspapers and individuals progressively



Denis Goldberg

banned, we just knew there had to be a different response. The question then became: when armed struggle started, where would it be, who would take part, what form would it take?

I was doing a lot of public work, in the courts, writing and addressing meetings. Denis Goldberg seemed to be around less and less, other people one knew seemed to disappear. No one asked any questions. It was better not to know.

KEEN MOUNTAINEER

One day, Denis rolled up at my place and asked if, seeing that I was a keen mountaineer, I could take a crowd of young people for a very vigorous hike on Table Mountain one Sunday. I agreed, and we met near the Kirstenbosch Gardens, and I really took them up hill and down dale, till they were gasping and exhausted, though none of them complained openly,

since they were not going to let a white man (me) do better than them.

Later Denis asked if I could give a class to a group of campers on a political education holiday at a place called Mamre not very far from Cape Town. I agreed, and a few weeks afterwards I was sitting in a tent, baking hot, talking about the history of South Africa from a people's point of view. It was mid summer, and I don't remember what I said, but I do recall some of those present dozing off. The person in charge, Looksmart Solwandle, had a thin branch in his hand, and every-time someone's eyes closed, he would flick the branch on the person's arm to wake him up.

"If the teacher makes them fall asleep" I told comrade Looksmart "you should hit the teacher". Looksmart, the gentlest of comrades was quite stern when it came to respecting the teacher, however, in any event, the class was interrupted: the police had arrived, and in large numbers. The place was surrounded, we were taken off to the nearest police station, and processed one by one. There was no hard evidence against anyone, and we were told to be ready to face charges on some technical violation or other. (Those were the days when the police needed evidence!)

About a year or so later, another knock on the door in my 'chambers', and this time it was a woman who introduced herself to me as the wife of comrade Looksmart. Slowly she took me through the story of how her husband had been detained under the 90 day law, how the police had moved him from one police station to the next. I kept interrupting to say sadly that there was nothing we lawyers could do, until she reached the end of the story: comrade Looksmart had been found dead, allegedly after hanging himself in his cell. This was the first time in our generation that a comrade had been tortured to death. The shock was overwhelming. But there was something we as lawyers could do. We could demand an inquest, and at least try to expose what

had happened.

HEAVY BLOWS

This was a bitter time for all of us. Our movement was taking heavy blows. The dark decade of the 1960s was upon us. Our main function was to survive and re-group. The capture of our leaders at Rivonia, with Denis amongst them (so that was where he had been!), led to more and more detentions, and soon I was amongst them, being questioned on a whole range of things, including the camp at Mamre. Fortunately, we had managed to get many comrades out, which was not all that easy, Cape Town being far from any border. One of them we were especially sorry to see go. His name was Martin, and although he seemed a bit soft for the city, having spent most of his life in educational institutions in the Transkei, he had been virtually the only ANC intellectual in what we called 'the locations', the other intellectuals being mainly with the PAC.

I remember going to fetch Martin one night to take him to a safe hideout, the police were after him. A car in which he was travelling had been found to contain ANC pamphlets, and this required real courage on my part, since the dogs in the location set up such a howl, and there was no way of convincing them that this white man marching along nervously was a comrade who believed in the Freedom Charter.

Twenty and more years later, at the ANC National Consultative Conference in Kabwe, a comrade comes up to me, stares in my face, looks again, and asks if I am comrade Albie Sachs. I stare back at him, there is something familiar about him, but I can't really recognise him. "Remember me?" he asks "from the camp in Mamre..." And another comrade, and another, all were in the first detachments of MK, and saw action in Zimbabwe before being imprisoned for a dozen years by Smith's forces. Now they and I are together again, all of us still struggling, active and alive, parts of this indestructible thing called the ANC, hugging each other in celebration of our survival and of our confidence in the future. And there up on the platform, is the soft, solitary intellectual, only now he is not called Martin any more, he is known as Chris.

* The Chris (Martin) referred to is the Army Commissar of MK.

DYNAMITE THIEVES

Ronnie Kasrils

"You're not doing enough!" the burly figure of our commander, Joe Modise, snapped at us.

We were meeting him secretly in a sugar cane field near Durban. The year was 1962. He was down from Johannesburg, shortly after the arrest of our Commander-in-Chief, Nelson Mandela, and he was addressing Curnick Ndlovu, Billy Nair, myself and other members of the Natal Regional Command of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

We had opened our combat account on December 16th 1961, with home-made bomb attacks on government targets and were busy building our network. After comrade Mandela's arrest in July, 1962 we had recorded our protest with petrol bomb attacks on goods trains and regime offices. But to be honest we had not been active enough.

In the Transvaal there had been some spectacular actions with dynamite smuggled out of the mines. One of our number proffered the excuse: "If only we had dynamite like you comrades on the Reef, comrade Joe." Modise cut in: "We're getting small quantities from sympathetic mine workers. You've got quarries here in Natal", he growled, "get your own supplies and get on with it!"

With that the meeting was over and we felt both sheepish and determined to prove we could deliver the goods. We ordered comrades to be on the lookout for sources of dynamite. Word soon came in of a road construction camp outside Pine-town, near Marianhill, that was using dynamite. Curnick Ndlovu, our regional commander, ordered me to reconnoiter the place. I drove out with a fellow MK cadre, Eleanor Anderson (later my wife) to locate the place. We packed a picnic lunch and after some searching found the site.

A road was being blasted out of the hills. There was a hive of activity with vehicles and workers busy on the mammoth task. Unperturbed we set-out our picnic quite close to a formidable barbed-wire enclosure with a pair of red-boxed magazines.

It was a challenging sight and we imagined the desirable sticks of dynamite stored inside. No

one paid this peculiar white couple much attention. We placidly munched our sandwiches and sipped our cokes even though, what with the dust and commotion and distant booming of dynamite blasting in the hills, the once rustic scene now scarcely qualified as your ideal picnic spot.

I knitted my brows, puzzling how we would need to cut our way through the tough-looking fencing. Eleanor was much more practical than I. Her solution was simplicity itself. "If only we could get over to that padlocked gate and check the manufacture and number of the lock we wouldn't even need wire-cutters" she observed.

In answer to my puzzled expression she explained: "Once you can get the number of any lock it's possible to buy the self-same one and with it the key. All the makes are on sale in the hardware shops and that padlock looks a common type to me" she confidently concluded.

The suggestion seemed worthwhile exploring and taking advantage of a lull in the activity in our vicinity I sauntered over to the gate in question. To my surprise I immediately noticed the brand name and serial number engraved on the padlock, yet another example of the better observation qualities possessed by the so-called fairer sex (at least over this male anyway)! we finished our picnic and departed.

During the next week we checked-out the various hardware stores in Durban. Eleanor returned from one such excursion to Henwoods in West Street. "Here you are" she coolly announced, handing me a copy of the padlock and key I had seen at Marianhill.

One night a week later Billy, Eric Mtshali, Mannie Isaacs who was our driver, and I assembled for the raid. Additional reconnaissance had established that a solitary guard always went drinking between 8 and 10 pm.

We arrived at our destination leaving Mannie parked by some bushes. He had no idea about the true nature of the mission and thought we were attending yet another clandestine meeting in the bush. We approached the object of our interest with bated