

A CANNY OPERATOR

Remembering a relentless revolutionary: Dawood Seedat

IF YOU came of age in the late 1930s in South Africa there were many issues to politically consume. In 1938 Afrikaner nationalism was boosted by centenary celebrations of the Great Trek. Ox-wagons trekked across the country in a dizzy re-enactment of the people "chosen by God" to rule this land. War clouds were looming.

Jan Smuts went from Boer "terrorist" to what was seen as the henchman of the Empire. His desire to join the United Kingdom in the war against Germany split the Afrikaners, many of whom still carried the wounds of the concentration camps and had sympathy with the Nazis. Indian, Coloured and African people were hemmed in by draconian segregation laws but as yet were divided in their responses.

It was in this political cauldron that Dawood Seedat, the grandson of a prominent trader in Ladysmith, ME Seedat of the firm of Ismail, Mahomed & Co. in Murchison Street, was to enter history.

ME Seedat's son Ahmed moved to Durban to educate his sons Dawood, Hoosen, Mohammed, and Moosa (d. 2010).

Hoosen (d. 2008) was a maxillo-facial surgeon and professor at the Medical School at the Natal University while Mo Seedat was based at King Edward VIII Hospital.

But Dawood Seedat was to earn a different kind of "professorship". After qualifying as a bookkeeper, Seedat entered the political struggle in the late 1930s. Paul Joseph, once of the TIC, described Seedat in his obituary as "quiet, unassuming, always sporting red ties, Dawood cut a Makarenco-like figure with rimless spectacles and his manner of dealing with people".

This was in reference to Anton Semyonovich Makarenko (1888-1939), the Ukrainian-born writer who, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, established self-supporting orphanages for street children.

In the 1930s, Seedat helped to establish the Liberal Study Group which included political luminaries such as Monty Naicker, IC Meer, and Cassim Amra. It was a group that followed global politics with incredible intensity. The struggle against the Empire in India had reached a crescendo, one their own Gandhi had become de facto leader of this movement and they were buoyed by the idea that Britain was on the backfoot.

The group published a monthly newsletter – *The Call for Freedom and Justice* – with Seedat as its proprietor and Cassim Amra as editor.

The study group and publication of *The Call* brought them to the attention of the police. In July 1940, in reaction to *The Call's* anti-war rhetoric, police raided Seedat's home.



GOOLAM VAHED



ASHWIN DESAI

Seedat refused to be cowed by the use of overwhelming force. He refused to allow this "unwarranted intrusion". But he was forcibly shoved back while the police ransacked the place in real Gestapo fashion. When Seedat's grandmother tried to intervene, she was roughly pushed aside and documents were carted off in Seedat's personal briefcase.

War was declared. What would Seedat as a Communist do?

The Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin had tried to seek a deal with Hitler and so Communists across the world took a hands off approach. Seedat, too, opposed South Africa's participation in World War II.

He wrote an article, "Don't Support the War", to dissuade Indians from enlisting in the army. His objections were based on Britain's role as an imperial power as well as racial discrimination in South Africa.

A secret memorandum of the Department of Justice, dated January 20, 1964, recorded that "this pamphlet, coupled with the agitation of Seedat had a marked deterrent effect upon the recruiting of Indians for the war at the time". On February 5, 1941, Seedat told a mass meeting at Red Square that "if freedom will not be given to us, we will have to use force and take our freedom".

He was charged with contravening National Security Regulations. His other charge was "scandalous and dishonouring words" against King George VI and Smuts, which he argued: "I personally have no respect for King George VI. We have a satellite of the king in this country, General Smuts. He is a cunning and clever crook... Do you know that the British Empire is not an empire but a vampire? It drains all the wealth out of India and keeps millions of our people in suffering, starvation, sickness, illiteracy, and without homes.... We, too, in this South Africa; let us raise the voice of revolution."

Seedat was a canny operator and might well have pioneered the Stalinist approach to the courts in South Africa. He used a series of ruses to slow down the wheels of the racist courts.

When the case was first heard before magistrate Ryle Masson in Durban, Seedat asked for an adjournment because he was unable to secure counsel.



DAWOOD Seedat (kneeling left) with activists in the 1940s. Yusuf Dadoo is standing (middle). To his right is M Naidoo and to his left is IC Meer. Kneeling on the right is George Ponnen.



Seedat welcomed by the community after serving his prison sentence, 1941.

He was given a postponement to March 14, 1941.

On that day he told the magistrate that he had engaged an advocate from the Transvaal who, it transpired, was not admitted to the Natal Bar. Despite vigorous protests from the prosecutor, the magistrate granted a remand until April 16. Harry Bloom was brought from Johannesburg.

Seedat, unbowed, in a resplendent red tie, used the trial to make an impassioned speech: "The non-Europeans of this country, due to South Africa's participation in the present imperialist war, are called upon to sacrifice their lives for a cause that offers them nothing but insult and humiliation... We do not enjoy any privileges and yet we are expected to respect a system of government that denies us these rights... The British government is much concerned about the Poles and has gone to war on that issue but it has not shown itself in any way willing to grant the simplest of democratic rights to 400 million in India. If I say that I would like to see the downfall of the British Empire it is so that my people can begin to regenerate themselves."

Seedat was a man who openly took on Smuts and King George. Now he called for the "downfall of the British Empire". The magistrate was livid and showed his resentment openly. Dawood was hauled off to prison for three months with hard labour.

The three months were harsh. Warders singled him out for the hardest tasks. He was mocked and put on a sparse diet. But despite his wiry frame, he was a man hardened by ideological optimism.

In the week before his release his comrades began to organise a suitable welcome. This was a horrible time for Indians in Durban. Whites had mobilised to prevent what was to be seen as Indian penetration of white areas. The language used against Indians was one of crass racism. Threats were made against Indians on the streets and there were increased police raids of areas around the Indian market.

Seedat was seen as a man who would not be intimidated, and his court speech evoked incredible respect. Before his release on July 17, 1941, pamphlets were circulated widely advertising a meeting to accord "a public welcome to a young leader who was imprisoned for championing the cause of non-European freedom".

For Communist Party Rusty Bernstein, the arrest of Yusuf Dadoo and Seedat "triggered the biggest campaign of meetings, handbills and posters that the party had managed for years... Whether we affected the fate of Dadoo and Seedat is hard to say. Both were found guilty and sentenced to short terms of imprisonment, making them the first martyrs of the Communist Party revival".

Seedat was to continue his activism.

The entry of the Soviet Union into the War, he argued, had tipped the balance towards not just the defeat of the Nazis but also the destruction of the empire. He founded the Indian Shop Assistant's Union in 1942; was imprisoned for three months in 1943 for his part in the Anti-Pass campaign of the ANC; was secretary of the CPISA in Durban; was a key organiser of meetings at Red Square; and worked almost full-time for the leftist newspaper, Guardian.

From July 1951 to February 1952, Seedat visited Palestine, East Germany, the USSR and China.

He was probably the first South African to visit the People's Republic of China after Mao Tse Tung had established a communist republic.

In East Germany, he addressed the Third World Festival of Youth. No one quite knows how he got to these countries as he left South Africa with a passport valid for India only and returned to the ironically named Bloemfontein Castle on February 6 1952.

As the 40s turned into the 50s, Monty Naicker led the NIC's move into an alliance with the ANC. The 1949 Indo-African riots were a catalyst for meetings and the inauguration of the Defiance Campaign of 1952. Seedat was in the thick of things.

Seedat addressed a mass rally at Red Square on September 25, 1952, urging people to volunteer for the Defiance Campaign. He gave the same message when he spoke at a meeting at Trades Hall in Johannesburg on October 1, 1952 to celebrate the third anniversary of New China.

On April 2, 1954 he addressed an NIC and ANC meeting in Durban to protest Sophiatown removals and increased rentals at the Magazine Barracks. In May 1955, as a member of the Natal Peace Council, he spoke out against the atomic bomb. He was imprisoned for 14 days in September 1955 for holding illegal meetings at the corner of Grey and Lorne streets.

As the Congress Alliance galvanised around the Freedom Charter, Seedat – his red tie now a famous sight at rallies – was arrested. He would stand trial for Treason in 1956, one of 156. The charge against him was dropped on April 20, 1959. Through all this his wife Fatima Seedat marched alongside and just as often ahead of him.

Seedat's pace was unrelenting. During the State of Emergency in 1960, Seedat was arrested on March 31, 1960. Though the police files state that "nothing of evidential value was found in his possession", he was only released on July 5.

Seedat was vice-president of the NIC at this time. He and his wife were banned for five years in January 1964, which was extended for a further five years in 1969.

The family suffered. There was a



A SKETCH of Dawood Seedat and Yusuf Dadoo during the Treason Trial.

Seedat's Release

A Leading Member of the Non-European United Front and the Nationalist Bloc.

Mr. D. A. SEEDAT who was imprisoned on 30th April, 1941, will be released on 17th July, 1941, at 8 a.m.

All sympathisers and supporters are asked to be present at the Central Gaol on Thursday, 17th July, 1941, at 7.45 a.m. to

WELCOME this Young Leader who was imprisoned for Championing the cause of NON-EUROPEAN FREEDOM.

At 5.30 p.m. on Thursday, 17th July, 1941, a Meeting will be held at the M.K. Gandhi Library & Parsee Rustomjee Hall, 140, Queen Street, Durban, to accord Mr. Seedat a Public Welcome.

Come in your hundreds to greet this young leader who served imprisonment in defence of your rights.

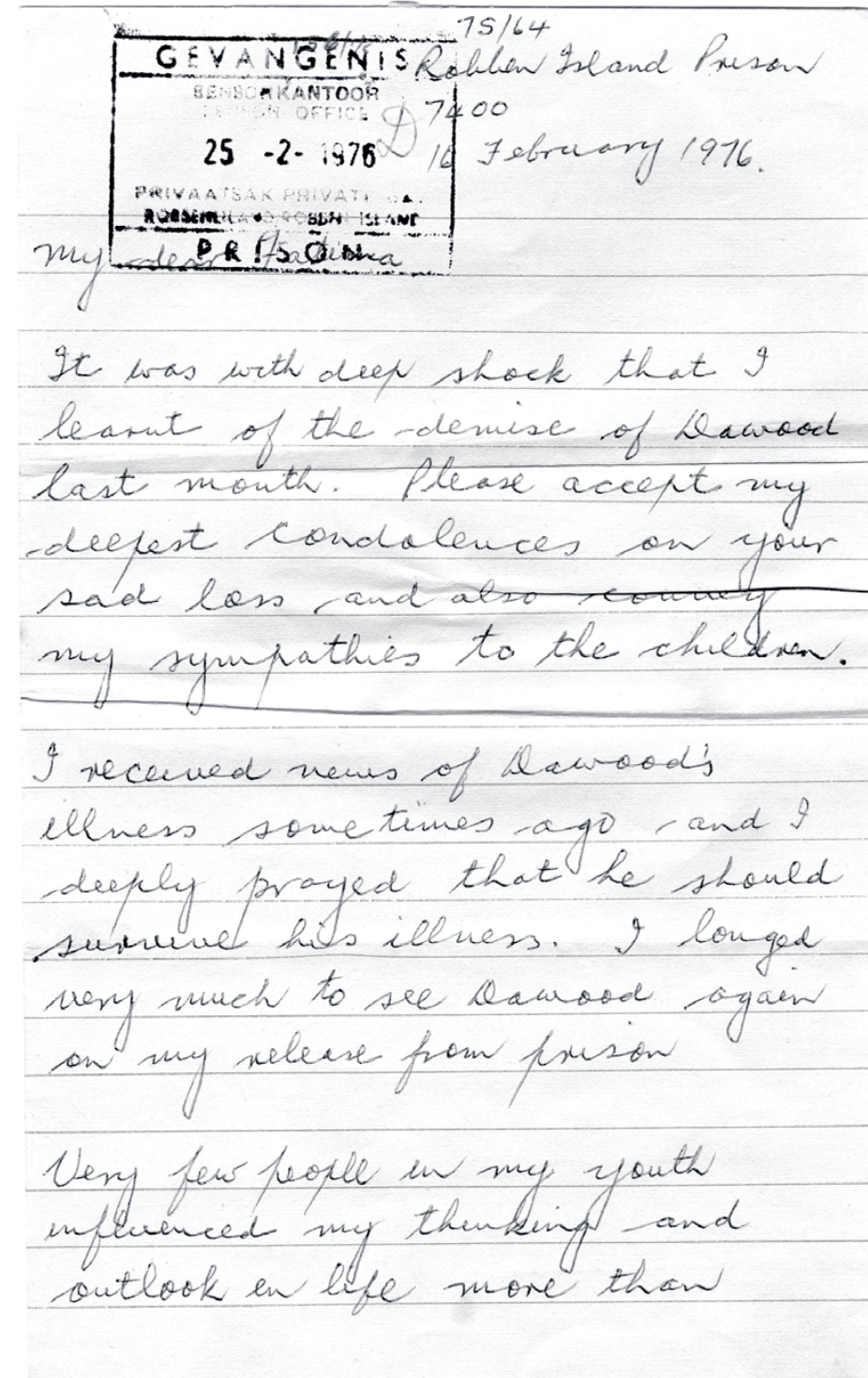
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LETTER of condolence from Ahmed Kathrada, then on Robben Island.

downturn in the Struggle after the banning of her liberation movements. Comrades were incarcerated or fled into exile. The street rallies seemed a distant history. Spies and police were everywhere.

The Seedat's were marked people. Seedat died in 1976. In the tomes of literature that have come out about the liberation struggle, Seedat is a forgotten

figure. It would not have bothered him. But it should bother us.

Many of the stories of activists from the 1940s to the 1970s are covered in Monty Naicker: *Between Reason and Treason* by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, available at Ikes Bookstore in Florida Road.



SEEDAT speaking to AKM Docrat and supporters upon his release from prison, 1941.



ON his tour of Eastern Europe, 1951.