

KATHY KATHRADA¹

In the long struggle for freedom in South Africa, the Indian community, barely three percent of the population, was privileged to contribute many activists who dedicated their lives to the cause, never wavered under repression, and never thought of retirement. This may be because of the lasting influence of Mahatma Gandhi in the country, even on those who professed more radical ideologies, or because the combined impact of Gandhi, Indian nationalism and Marxism (and the Islamic upbringing with emphasis on human equality, in the case of some) created a band of professional revolutionaries in the 1930s and 1940s.

Two of the activists - the late Dr. Yusuf M. Dadoo whose 80th birthday will be observed on September 5th, and Ahmed Mohamed ("Kathy") Kathrada who will be sixty on August 21st - have been honoured by the African National Congress with its highest decoration - *Isitwalandwe Seaparankoe* in recognition of their contribution to the liberation struggle.

They regarded themselves essentially as volunteers or soldiers in the freedom struggle, rather than as leaders, always ready to take the lead in defying the oppressors and in making sacrifices, and exercised great influence through their example. They rose from the struggle of the Indian community for its survival and honour, but soon identified themselves with the African majority in the movement for the liberation of all the people from racist tyranny and the restructuring of the society. They joined the struggle in their childhood and suffered persecution, but always loved life and kept their spirits high - "Doc" in exile and "Kathy" in prison where he has been confined for half his life.

Dr. Dadoo became an influential leader and an elder statesman known around the world. Kathy Kathrada is little known outside South Africa - and the delicate missions he undertook for the movement are not widely known even in South Africa. This article is devoted to his life and role in the struggle.

Kathy Kathrada was born on August 21, 1929, in a respected religious family in Schweizer Reineke, a country town some 240 miles from Johannesburg. Moving to Johannesburg for his schooling - as he could not be admitted in the European or African schools in the area - he came under the influence of the leaders of the Nationalist Bloc of the Transvaal Indian Congress and the Non-European United Front, including Dr. Dadoo and the Cachalia brothers (Moulvi and Yusuf). He began political work at the age of 12, handing out leaflets at street corners and performing other volunteer work for the organisations. He helped in the individual

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passive resistance against the Pegging Act in 1941 and collected funds for Bengal famine relief in 1943.

In 1946, when the Indian community launched the Passive Resistance Movement against the "Ghetto Act", Kathy, then only 16, gave up his schooling to do full-time work in the office of the Passive Resistance Council in Johannesburg. He helped edit the *Passive Resister* and assisted the great African mineworkers' strike in August 1946.

In December that year, he was imprisoned for the first time as a passive resister. Then only 17, he gave a wrong age to the police so that he would not be treated as a juvenile but sent to prison.

He was a foundation member of the Transvaal Indian Volunteer Corps which helped in the passive resistance campaign, and was elected secretary-general of its successor, the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress. As the alliance between the African and Indian Congresses developed, he came into close contact with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, J.B. Marks and other African leaders. He worked tirelessly to promote joint action as secretary of the Youth Action Committee of the youth wings of the African, Indian and other congresses.

In 1951, while a student at the Witwatersrand University, he was sent by the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress as a delegate to the World Youth Festival in Berlin and was elected leader of the multi-racial South African delegation. He then spent nine months at the headquarters of the World Federation of Democratic Youth.

Returning to South Africa, he plunged into the organisation of the "Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws" - launched jointly by the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress in 1952 - in which over eight thousand people of all racial origins courted imprisonment. He was tried with the leaders of the two Congresses and was given a suspended sentence of nine months.

That was the first of three occasions when he was tried with Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. He was in the dock with them in the treason trial of 1956-61, when the charges were dismissed after one of the longest trials, and then in the "Rivonia trial" of 1963-1964 when they were sentenced to life imprisonment.

He joined the protests against the Bantu Education Act of 1954, which enforced rigid segregation in schools, and was active in the campaign against the removal of Africans from Sophiatown in Johannesburg. The regime then served banning orders on him prohibiting him from attending gatherings and from membership in a long list of organisations. But he refused to be intimidated and wrote in a "letter to the youth of South Africa":

"For nine years I have been working as a full-time official in the National Liberatory Movement. For these nine years and more, you and the people whom we represent have over and over again expressed your full confidence in our policies and actions by electing me and re-electing us to the leadership of our organisations...Now I have been ordered to resign my positions from various organisations and not to become a member of some 39 bodies. This order comes, not from you, not from the people who elected me, and to whom I am directly responsible, but from a fanatical Minister of State, in the appointment of whom neither I nor the great majority of the people of South Africa had any say...

"I am not addressing these lines to my friends and comrades as a farewell letter... I wish to assure you that I will be at your disposal to serve you in any manner you wish; as in the past, so at present and in the future. No sacrifice will be too great in the struggle to achieve freedom in our lifetime."

And, echoing Gandhi, he declared, "there is no such thing as defeat" in the cause of freedom.

In 1955 when the Indian school in Johannesburg was moved out of the city to the segregated location of Lenasia, some 22 miles away, he helped organise the Central Indian High School in Johannesburg. (In its short existence, this school attracted a distinguished teaching staff and among its alumni are several present leaders of the movement such as Aziz Pahad and Abdul Samad Minty.) In the same year, he also helped organise the multi-racial "Congress of the People" which proclaimed the "Freedom Charter" - though he could not attend it personally.

He was arrested in December 1956, in the nation-wide sweep of over 150 leaders of the freedom movement and went through the marathon treason trial until the acquittal of the last batch of the accused in March 1961. Even during the trial, he continued his political work. The regime restricted him to Johannesburg in 1957.

He was detained, with the other defendants, when a State of Emergency was proclaimed after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960. They decided to dismiss their lawyers and conduct their own defence. Kathrada, accused No. 2, called Moulvi I.A. Cachalia, also in prison, as a witness. The examination and testimony of Moulvi - well over 300 pages of the record - is a valuable document on the history of the struggle in South Africa.

After the end of the treason trial, Kathy spent a semi-clandestine life for over a year, evading arrest and performing several missions. He was among the few trusted activists responsible for the security and contacts of the "Black Pimpernel", Nelson Mandela, as he went underground to organise resistance and

went abroad to secure support. (For Kathy had often undertaken such delicate tasks. It was he who escorted the Reverend Michael Scott to Bechuanaland in 1949, thus enabling him to internationalise the issue of Namibia and develop the international movement against apartheid).

When Mandela was arrested on August 5, 1962, Kathy came out into the open to launch the "Free Mandela" campaign which was to develop into one of the greatest international campaigns in later years. Because of this, the regime served stringent banning orders on him on October 22, 1962, including confinement to his flat, without any visitors, at nights and over weekends. (He was the second person to be placed under "house arrest"; a week earlier, similar orders were served on Mrs. Helen Joseph, respected women's leader).

Kathy bluntly refused suggestions from the movement that he go into exile as many others had done. On the eve of the enactment of the "90-day law" in May 1963, with the imminence of indefinite and *incommunicado* detention, he went underground, disguised as "Pedro", the Portuguese. But he was arrested on July 11th in Rivonia where he went to attend a meeting. His defence in the "Rivonia trial" of 1963-64 reflected his courage, his defiance and his wit.

Kathy has spent over 26 years in prison. The child who left school to learn in the struggle, now became an avid student turning his prison cell into a university. Studying by correspondence, he obtained two B.A.'s (one in bibliography) and two honours degrees (in history and African politics). The prison authorities refused to allow him to pursue postgraduate studies.

He has managed to keep abreast of developments outside. His letters from prison, according to his friends, reflect his unbounded optimism. He has spurned offers of conditional release and, I believe, does not care to come out before his leaders, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu. No one knows when they will be freed, though rumours are floated from time to time.

But one thing is certain. Even the short-sighted politicians now recognise that the inhuman and stupid system of apartheid - a system which seeks to enthrone those with a white skin as lords and masters with licence to oppress, exploit and humiliate those with darker skins - is doomed. And the name of Kathy Kathrada will be remembered with respect long after the inventors and executioners of apartheid are forgotten.