

Kathrada: an Examined Life Well Worth Living¹

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At the end of the Second World War, Albert Camus anticipated that remarkable testimony would come from the men and women of the French Resistance against Nazi Germany's occupation of France. It didn't happen. Not all who personally have survived world-shaking experience have the ability to recount it.

But we in South Africa have been fortunate: good contributions to the alternative history that can be pieced together only by those who have suffered personal danger and sacrifice have come to us.

The latest addition to this composite is outstanding. Staunch and subtle, fiercely moral and tender, idealistic and daringly independent-minded, emotions not blunted by stoicism, humour not defeated by merciless humiliation and hardship – Ahmed Kathrada's Memoirs are read through the prism of his character.

Those of us who lived the eras of apartheid and liberation may think we know what these were; as the prism is turned upon great events – the terrible, the magnificently overcome – a whole new, deeper level of the reality is gained.

How do you become a revolutionary? In South Africa, how did your law-decreed situation, as black or white or "other", affect your bona fide as a member of the liberation struggle, when in prison you were issued with long pants and given bread while others were issued shorts and mealie-meal? How do you make symbiotic the differences between political ideologies and faiths you and your cell-mates hold? How do you deal with your tortures as fellow humans? How do you come to terms with isolation from emotional life, whether the sensuous, the sight of open fields, or the sexual, as partner in a love affair, a marriage?

Kathrada moves without bravado and without any subterfuge of "political correctness" into these situations as he experienced them and as he shared them with others.

I was conscious of repetition in his totally engaging narrative. Then I realized that this is the genuine nature of such an account. **In the life of a man to whom so much has happened, in the convictions and actions he has chosen to risk, an event, a decision, even a casual encounter, reveals its meaning only at different stages of gathering experience, and must be returned to in those lights.**

Kathrada was born the son of an Indian shopkeeper in the village of Schweizer-Reneke. He returns to it often in the back-and-forth of memory, its relevant to the laws and mores of South Africa since Van Riebeeck. After a lifetime decreed by racism in and out of prisons, culminating on Robben Island and Pollsmoor, he is not afraid to speak warmly of the paradoxical friendly relations between whites and Indians in this Afrikaner dorp when he was a child, and doesn't fail to pass on, with humour and pleasure, how in time of

police harassment and even in prison, if the policeman or warder turned out to come from Shweizer-Reneke, his attitude to his victim changed: something, after all, was still shared.

Anecdotes of the liberation struggle are revealing of how people formed themselves for action. Kathrada is a good raconteur. No wonder that anecdotes are part of the fascination of this book. He was sent to school in Johannesburg, grew up in Fordsburg, becoming politically aware and active. He was one of the young bloods who dubbed themselves “The Picasso Club”, putting up illegal posters against the banning of Congress leaders and writing slogans on walls. I remember one at the white-only Johannesburg Library: “We Black Folk Ain’t Reading Yet”.

13 Kholvad House, the Johannesburg city flat he moved into, was to become the legendary hot rendezvous of political activists and defiant partying over the years of the iron grille of restrictive laws and banning. Kathrada, the secretary of the Indian Youth Congress, was also a member of the South African Communist Youth. He discusses, with the stead openness that characterizes his attention to all questions of internal political discussion, that between the Communist Party, the Transvaal Indian Congress and the ANC over the Defiance Campaign: and how the ANC Youth opposed co-operation as a detraction from the ANC’s own programme, which in 1949 turned towards non-co-operation with other organizations.

This timely background for anyone who wants to understand the unity that eventuated in the Congress Alliance, whose relevance to the present comes up each other, as now, we have elections ahead.

A world-view is always conscious in Kathrada. It surely began with his startling delegation as a secretary of the Indian Youth Congress to several years at the Budapest headquarters of the World Federation of Democratic Youth during Hungarian communist regime.

Returned to South Africa, he took head-on action in many campaigns of opposition to intensifying oppression. Finally he joined the banned SACP underground; the road to the Rivonia Trial, complex, in his case since his presence at Liliesleaf Farm, high command headquarters of the major liberation forces, seems to have been the ambiguous one of Indian Youth representative with a mandate for political education on the ANC programme, while recruiting for the SACP. He was in both nationalist revolution and class struggle an overriding common aim - the liberation of South Africa from racism. And the unity led to his becoming Accused No 5 at the Rivonia Treason Trial and Prisoner No 468/4 on Robben Island.

His reflections on what he calls “the polarity of human belief” are searchingly honest. In this context, he remains a socialist in belief in the justice of socialism’s ideals, but unlike many others, was not hesitant to deplore the communist invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968.

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Of course, in the experiences laid open in this man's life, the solar plexus where the full impact is revealed is the Rivonia Trial and his resultant life sentence to Robben Island. The to-and-fro between Accused No 5 Kathrada and prosecutor Percy Yutar in cross examination reads like a play written in collaboration by Shaw, Brecht and Beckett.

The depth and sensitivity of Kathrada's account of 26 years of political imprisonment establish how this is, indeed, nothing less than "the other life" that exists in exclusion of virtually all that makes a life.

Morally, the political prisoner has no crime to repent: his survival drive is that he is incarcerated for doing what was right, and will prevail. The "other" form of human sustenance, the emotional kind, starved of contact with loved ones outside, is shown as formed in the confinement with the personalities of men who share the same ideals, and with whom, in friendship, in disagreements, in shared sufferings, in the techniques of gaining small victories over senseless prison brutality, a human relationship of unmatched intensity and worth was experienced, to remain within Kathrada ever since.

If the unexamined life is not worth living, Kathrada's memory does not spare himself. He examines where he thinks he made mistakes, failed his high standards in behaviour towards others, where he misread tactics chosen by the struggle for freedom. In the tribunal of this book, beyond the great testimony to his bravery, he clearly has reached that priceless achievement, truth and reconciliation with oneself.

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