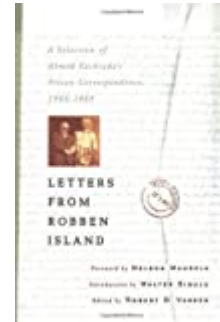


A. M. Kathrada. *Letters From Robben Island: A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989.* Edited by Robert D Vassen. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999. xxvi + 263 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87013-527-9.



Reviewed by Clapperton Mavhunga (Department of History, University of Zimbabwe)

Published on H-SAfrica (October, 2001)

Most of the books on the liberation struggles in Southern Africa deal with the bush wars and the political struggles. Kathrada chronicles in his letters the struggle from prison and what it was “like as a member of the liberation movement to live in an apartheid jail”. The list of Kathrada’s acquaintances reads like a “who is who” of South Africa’s anti-apartheid heroes—Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Bram Fischer—the list is endless. It also gives a social side of prison-life, the question of basic rights, the breakdown of social contacts outside prison and the creation of more enduring ones in prison. This book is about the multi-racial dynamics of South Africa’s anti-apartheid struggle, indeed a “rainbow struggle”.

Kathrada’s liberation struggle started outside prison in the 1950s and 1960s. Much of it was fought from inside jail, and was completed outside it. This struggle from the prison walls is the subject of this book. In the Foreword, Walter Sisulu tells us that writing or receiving letters was a “privilege which we cherished very dearly”. For this reason, Kathrada made and kept copies of all letters he wrote (p. xvi). The letters reveal “his engaging personality, his uncompromising views, and his sharp wit and humor”. Kathrada was “a tower of strength and a source of inspiration to many prisoners ... across the political spectrum” and, not surprisingly, the recipient of the ANC’s

highest award for meritorious service to the liberation struggle, the Isithwalandwe Award.

The book begins with the background to the life imprisonment of Kathrada, Mandela, Sisulu, Dennis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, and Andrew Mlangeni—the famous Rivonia Trialists—after being convicted of sabotage. All but Goldberg—who was taken to an all-white penitentiary—were incarcerated at Robben Island as “security, or political, prisoners”. Goldberg was released in 1985, Mbeki in 1988, Sisulu, Kathrada, Mhlaba, Motsoaledi and Mlangeni in 1989, and Mandela, the most famous of the Rivonia Trialists, in February 1990.

The reader needs to understand the letters within their context and the editor, Robert Vassen, takes us on a journey through the multi-racial politics of the time. Vassen captures the three-tier racial divide in which Kathrada grew up: blacks were the lowest racial group, followed by non-Europeans, among them Indians, with better racial privileges than blacks, but not allowed to associate with whites, the superior race particularly if one was Afrikaner. This division would lead to a multi-racial coalition comprising blacks, Indians, non-Afrikaner whites, and coloreds in 1952 in a Defiance Campaign which laid the basis for the Congress Alliance, made up of the ANC, the South African Indian

Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organization, and the South African Congress of Democrats. This alliance led to the formation of Umkonto we Siswe (MK), the military wing of the ANC in 1961, consistent with the general pattern in Southern Africa at the time when the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), FRELIMO (Mozambique), and Angola's MPLA were taking up the militant option to liberate themselves. The culmination of this militancy was the Rivonia Trial, in which Kathrada and his colleagues were found guilty of committing "specified acts of sabotage" and sent to Robben Island in 1964.

Kathrada's letters fall into three periods: 1964-1970; 1971-1980; and 1981-1989. Those written to his white girlfriend, Sylvia Neame, an affair which under apartheid was illegal, dominate the letters between 1964-1970 (p. 1). The spirits of the prisoners were not broken by prison censors' communication "black out" or the physical exertions of breaking limestone in the quarry. Instead, they immersed themselves in academic studies which pushed time and kept their minds "fully occupied." Prison distance-education—at Robben Island, as in Rhodesia's Gonakudzingwa, Whawha and Salisbury Prisons where political prisoners were incarcerated—was "the most important concession" ever made by the colonial regimes to political detainees. But Kathrada quickly jerks our attention to the psychological effects of life in the single cell section, where 30 prisoners were kept apart, isolated from the 800-plus other detainees—400 of them "politicals". The effect of "living with the same faces day in day out" was shattering. They got "on one another's nerves" quite quickly, having "long exhausted all conversation relating to our experiences outside. All the jokes have been told; even gossip has become repetitive" (p. 47).

The prison is also portrayed as a place of irony. It was a place of racial fraternization, an island in a sea of racial hatred where white prison wardens and inmates sometimes could eat the same food, engage in conversation, and even share a joke (pp. 47-49). The freedom they sought outside was easy to find in prison! Kathrada also reveals the irony of struggle between apartheid and liberation forces, in which some elements of the latter had become ultra-racist and anti-white. "The PAC [Pan Africanist Congress] chaps", he complains, "have been generally colorless, bigoted, narrow and racialistic", and "suffer from massive inferiority complexes" (p. 48), which are apparent in their "one settler one bullet" ideology. Another irony is that of relaxation in a place of hard labor, which many of us think prison life is all about. Kathrada admits that "for the past three years we have not really

worked we just go to the quarry and do nothing" (p. 48). Neither is there any torture, in contrast to the non-political section, where Robben Island is "a veritable hell" of "brutal assaults ... broken arms, heads and huge weals all over the body" (p. 51). This is a two-sided Robben Island.

The letters written between 1971 and 1980 are both a drive down memory lane and a journey into the future. In one of them, Kathrada takes us back to his childhood days to his home village of Schweizer Reneke, where "there was a school for African children and one for white children but none for 'Indian' children. The law demanded strict segregation", and coloreds and Indians were caught up in-between, and Kathrada was forced to attend school 200 miles away (p. 58). What he reveals in this soliloquy is a landscape of deprivation on the grounds of race and color, where it can be worse to be Indian than black. This is a sobering thought for blacks who might regard themselves as worse off under apartheid.

Most of the author's letters to friends abroad in this period are both a reflection on the past and a focus on the future, which together reveal themselves in the two-sided dilemma facing the apartheid regime. It forced into exile many, who can only return after its demise, such as detainees like Kathrada who are serving life imprisonment. Yet apartheid seems to have also imprisoned itself, that is, through international isolation and sanctions out of which it can break only if it abolishes itself as a system. Therefore, apartheid, the detainees serving life imprisonment, and exiles abroad, all have one destiny. Just like exiles who feel homesick and return home to South Africa, to be jailed on arrival, apartheid cannot escape from its "prison" without risking being "detained" by the winds of change. The letters also reveal Kathrada's vision for the future, epitomized by men like Bram Fischer who forsake their white identity and privileges to fight for a non-racial South Africa: "a free man who fought against his own people to ensure the freedom of others" (pp. 68-69).

From 1978 onwards, prison segregation laws were tightened, especially the two-tier dressing and dietary regulations for different groups. These were divide and rule tactics in and outside jail designed to divide the liberation movement, and Mandela handled it rather amicably to prevent any unnecessary tension (pp. 96-99). Kathrada did, in fact, complain to the authorities about this clampdown, as well as increased censure of his letters, one of which had half of its contents slashed off as "subversive and objectionable" (p. 111).

Kathrada's anti-segregationist struggle is not restricted to politics but embraces all facets of life, as shown in his letter to Zohra Kathrada expressing disgust at the religious prejudices of his own people which forbid Muslims from marrying non-Muslims. He urges fellow-Muslims in his family to exercise tolerance and "to shed the religious and racial prejudice" because "in the times in which we live in there is absolutely no place for prejudices based on religion, race or color" (p. 115). In other words, he implies that South Africans fighting against apartheid must look at themselves and disabuse themselves of norms and values that impinge on all basic freedoms. The South African anti-apartheid struggle should be one that makes a complete break with the restrictive values of the past.

The letters written between 1981 and 1989 give us a new approach towards black stereotypes of the liberation struggle in South Africa. We are introduced to Indian heroes of the struggle—B.T. Naidoo, Roy Naidoo, M. "Murvy" Thandray, Ismail Bhana, Essop Pahad, Mac Maharaj, and many others. This is important not only to the history of Indian South Africans, but also in the nation-building process of the post-apartheid 'Rainbow Nation', that South Africa is not for blacks alone, nor for Whites alone, but for everyone. We are informed that the anti-apartheid struggle's Indian heroes are also the heroes of every South African. This is the message that Kathrada wished to put across to the breed of "nouveau riche" (new rich) Indians who were "alienating themselves from their humble origins, for being snobs and racists and often forsaking the less fortunate" (p.144).

All the letters from 1982 were written from Pollsmoor Maximum Prison, where Kathrada had been moved as a strategy to "cut off the head of the ANC on the island, by removing its leadership" (p. 146). Arguably the most important letter in the book is that of 13 February 1985, responding to then President P.W. Botha's statement in the House of Assembly that he could release the Rivonia Trialists and all other political prisoners if they unconditionally renounced violence. Its authors, Mandela, Kathrada, Sisulu, and Mlangeni, then imprisoned at Pollsmoor, dismissed Botha's statement as "a shrewd and calculated attempt to mislead the world into the belief that you have magnanimously offered us release from prison which we ourselves have rejected. Coming in the face of such unprecedented and widespread demands for our release your remarks can only be seen as the height of cynical politicking" (p. 168). The offer was intended to deflate international pressure and to divide the ANC between "war hawks" and "doves".

Kathrada's last letters before release from prison answer questions as to why Nelson Mandela, a hardened revolutionary advocating violence and confrontation when he was imprisoned, came out a warm, forgiving and non-racial person. Writing to a colleague on 29 October 1988, Kathrada says that "reminiscing about the past is one of the favorite pastimes of prisoners. It can be amusing, informative, educational and recreational" (p. 242). In his letter to Yasmin and Nazir Kathrada on 18 December 1988 he talks of making "a break from past lifestyles and the entry into new environments, about new friends and new relationships, about the need to curb one's individualistic streaks in order to fit into the greater whole, ... where the pronoun 'I' will be used less and less while 'we' will come into more general use" (p. 245). Prison means loss of freedom, of association and democratic participation, and is a process of adapting to what you cannot change. The prison is "a picture of great warmth, fellowship, friendship, humor and laughter; of strong convictions; of a generosity of spirit of compassion, solidarity and care, ... but more importantly, where one comes to know oneself, one's weaknesses, inadequacies and one's potentials. Unbelievably, it is a very positive, confident, determined—yes, even a happy community" (pp. 247-248).

All in all, this is a book about life imprisonment and its effects on Kathrada's social and political life which should offer the reader a number of insights. Firstly, it reveals an intimate touch of the personal welfare of political prisoners under apartheid which cannot be captured even in interviews with Kathrada himself or his friends today. Just as he intended, these letters are an invaluable historical archive, now in published form. We hope that other political detainees of the period in and outside South Africa will follow suit. Secondly, for those interested in Indian history in South Africa this book offers a challenge to Afro-centric stereotypes on liberation struggles in Southern Africa. We now know that the struggle was a multi-racial one, and South Africa's case, thanks to Kathrada, is not an isolated one. Finally, this is an important inventory on the contribution of political detainees in Southern African liberation struggles, a welcome refreshment from the dominant discourse on wars and war heroes, guns and military strategies. It was these heroes in prison garb and their symbolic determination not to renounce armed struggle even in exchange for their freedom from incarceration that in many ways inspired many a South African to give their lives to the liberation of their country. Kathrada was one of the citadels of that spirit, and we now know that Mandela did not stand alone but was just among many others of his class.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Clapperton Mavhunga. Review of Kathrada, A. M., *Letters From Robben Island: A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. October, 2001.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5580>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.