

Henry Makgothi: The softly-spoken freedom fighter

JACKSON MTHEMBU JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA - Apr 02 2011



April 2 2011 marks a sad, yet momentous end of an important chapter in the history of the African National Congress (ANC) and that of the struggle for liberation in South Africa when we pay our last respects to Henry Gordon Makgothi (82).

Makgothi made a big impact in the liberation and transformation of South Africa, yet he was so modest. From grey-haired ANC veterans to young cadres who packed the Johannesburg City Hall for the official memorial service held this week, they would not leave the podium without uttering the words: humble, modest, respectful, dedicated and committed, in describing this softly-spoken gallant fighter for freedom and champion of the poor.

Delivering a eulogy during the memorial service, Hapiloe Sello -- whose late father Khalaki spent years on Robben Island with Makgothi -- summed it up so well: "We met a man with such warmth, kindness, empathy, compassion and love that the relationship we formed with him was effortless and natural. He embraced us with the warmth of a father's love. It felt like we had known him forever."

Affectionately known to comrades, friends and relatives as "Squire", Makgothi was born on December 25 1928 to Walter Mokowa, a schoolteacher, and Martha, a domestic worker. Makgothi attended Pimville Government School and then started at St Peters Secondary School in Rosettenville in 1942. It was at St Peters where he met the late ANC president Oliver Reginald Tambo. Tambo mentored Makgothi and gradually introduced him to politics.

He joined the ANC Youth League in 1944 at St Peters, eventually becoming a committee member. He became very close to comrade Tambo and served as his personal assistant. Besides the young Makgothi's enthusiasm for politics, they also shared a love of music. In May 1945, Makgothi was elected as president of the ANC Youth League in the Transvaal. In 1948 he went on to the **University of Fort Hare** in the Eastern Cape, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree and a teacher's diploma. Among his peers at Fort Hare were the likes of Mathews Duma Nokwe, Nthato Motlana, and many others who were to play a meaningful role in South Africa's struggle for liberation. The first thing they did was to form a youth league branch on campus. Makgothi and his peers shared the belief that they were not just intellectuals but had to make a difference in society.

Upon completing his studies at Fort Hare, he taught at Pimville High School. He intensified his political activities, particularly the mobilisation for the Defiance Campaign against unjust apartheid laws. Makgothi, together with the late Duma Nokwe and Alfred Hutchinson, were fired from Pimville High during the 1952 Defiance Campaign. He then took up employment as a

records clerk at Isaacs and Kassel, an accounting and auditing company while continuing with his activism. He participated in the activities leading to the writing and adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955. In 1956 he was arrested and detained at the Fort Prison with another 155 leaders in what was known as the Treason Trial. It was during the trial that he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent many months in hospital. The charges against him were withdrawn in 1958, but he was constantly harassed and, in 1960, he crossed the border into the then Bechuanaland.

Officials in the then British protectorate handed him over to the South African police who charged him with leaving the country without a passport and he was sentenced to 10 years in jail. Two of these he served in Leeuwkop Prison before spending the next eight on Robben Island. Banned and restricted after his release, comrade Makgothi managed to secretly continue with his underground activities of establishing ANC networks in the country. When the ANC leadership became aware that his activities were about to be exposed, he managed to leave the country for Botswana in 1977. From Botswana he became responsible for coordinating political mobilisation inside the country. Due to pressure from the apartheid regime, the Botswana authorities asked him to leave the country.

From 1980 he was based at Solomom Mahlangu Freedom College. He became a mentor to the students and community in his role as political commissar and secretary for education. In 1985 he was elected to the national executive committee of the ANC and as deputy secretary general. On his return to South Africa, Makgothi worked in the ANC's finance office and later served as chief whip of the National Council of Provinces from 1997 to 1999. At the time of his death, he was an active member of the Mzala branch of the ANC.

We shall forever treasure his legacy.

- Jackson Mthembu is ANC national spokesperson

Source: **Mail & Guardian Online**

<http://mg.co.za/article/2011-04-02-henry-makgothi-the-softlyspoken-freedom-fighter/>