

Born into oppression and poverty, many Umkhonto weSizwe recruits chose to sacrifice their lives to fighting for freedom

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MY FATHER believed that a grey pair of pants ought to meet one's needs for the whole week. Grey pants, a white shirt, a tie and black shoes were the prescribed school uniform. But there was no reason, or so my father argued, why one should not stretch the same grey pair of pants to cover Saturday's trip to the Durban city centre. Grey pants also made a great accompaniment for one's Sunday attire.

As a result I never had the opportunity to step out in those Crockett & Jones shoes, Dorshire pants, or London Fog jackets that my peers in high school would regale me about.

This placed me at a great disadvantage when it came to women, a double whammy when it came to girls from Umlazi township. I lived in KwaMakhutha, a rural township as far as the Umlazi girls were concerned. A classmate from Umlazi once agreed to accompany me to the movies, but when she spotted me (before I spotted her) at the Berea train station, the rendezvous point, she took one look at my dress code and vanished. After an hour or so of waiting, I left.

I did come close to owning something that resembled the famed London Fog jacket. That was in June 1982 in Msizeni Shadrack Maphumulo's flat in Matsapa, Swaziland. Like all ANC exiles, Maphumulo would get an allocation of clothing, some from Scandinavian countries and some from communist countries.

Seeing that this emperor had a limited supply of clothing, Maphumulo gave me a number of items in his collection to try on. Among those items was a jacket that looked like the London Fog jacket. Its label had been removed, but that did not matter. For once, I had an item of clothing that would have made me worth noticing by school mates, especially the girls.



By Jabulani Sikhakhane

So, imagine my disappointment when another exiled comrade walked in, took one look at me in the London Fog lookalike, and promptly warned Maphumulo that security police at the Golela border post would easily identify the jacket as being of Eastern European origin. Since I had come to Swaziland legally using a Transkeian travel document, albeit one obtained under false pretences, I had to leave the jacket behind. With the Berea train station experience seared into my memory, I did not like the chap who walked in on me in Maphumulo's flat.

Maphumulo cared deeply, a trait he owed to his own poor upbringing. He was one of the exceptionally courageous activists who played a key role at critical moments in the Struggle against apartheid.

They came from very poor backgrounds and were of peasant stock. From birth, circumstances had conspired to bury them six feet underground. With little or no education, they migrated to the greater Durban area and other industrial zones in the then Natal in search of jobs. There, they were recruited into the affiliates of the trade union movement (which later became affiliates of the SA Congress of Trade Unions), which in Natal in the 1940s and 1950s ran political education

classes. As the late Moses Mabhida pointed out in one of his interviews: "These are the unions around which the strength of the liberation movement revolved."

In addition to the political theory which gave the new members their solid grounding as activists, these classes also helped spread into the rural areas the gospel of the Struggle against apartheid. Once politicised, these migrant workers would take the message home during their fortnightly or monthly visits.

The 1950s were a momentous decade for SA politics in general as it was during this period that the National Party, which had come into power in 1948, consolidated its position and began earnestly to implement its apartheid policies.

Hendrik Verwoerd (first as the minister for native affairs and later as the prime minister) created the most fertile ground for political activity. He introduced a raft of measures, including attempts to reduce the number of cattle owned by Africans and limit the amount of land each family could cultivate. Verwoerd also introduced the Bantu Authorities Act which sought to subvert the traditional system of government by introducing structures that he called the "natural native democracy".

Maphumulo was among the first MK cadres who were arrested and sentenced to spells on Robben Island where they sharpened their political understanding and became more seasoned activists.

Through debate and discussions of the errors made in the 1960s, men like Maphumulo came out of the island more determined and clear in

their minds about what needed to be done to rebuild the ANC underground structures in Natal and elsewhere.

The newly underground network suffered another blow in 1975 when people like Joseph Mdluli, Harry Gwala, Matthews Meyiwa and others were again arrested. Maphumulo, Judson Khuzwayo and Petrus Nyawose remained behind to rebuild a "well oiled" though small network with Maphumulo as the major link between the underground and the ANC in Swaziland. Maphumulo's network risked exposure, especially after an attempt to smuggle a large quantity of arms into SA in 1977. His comrades – Khuzwayo and Nyawose – left the country, but Maphumulo was detained but never charged, ending up in Modderbee prison where he continued recruiting for the ANC.

After his release from detention in 1979, Maphumulo was banned and restricted to the Inanda area where he remained until his escape to exile in Swaziland in 1981, where he remained until his abduction and murder on December 12, 1986. And wherever he settled, Maphumulo, like many of his comrades, could not escape the basic human instinct to start a family.

So, tomorrow's celebration of the 50th anniversary of the formation of Umkhonto weSizwe ought not be about reopening the wounds of who fired a shot, or lobbed a hand grenade, at whom. To borrow from *The War Memorial*, a poem about World War I by SJ Robinson, tomorrow's celebration should not be about glorifying war or justifying that it is right.

"I am just here because men believed their death could make your future bright," Robinson wrote.

Tomorrow should be about the memory of people like Maphumulo, who believed their fight was about creating a brighter future for all.

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