

AHMED KATHRADA ARCHIVAL EXHIBITION

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The African National Congress (ANC) and Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC) leader, Ahmed “Kathy” Kathrada, was passionate about history, particularly the history of the liberation movement in South Africa. During the many years of his incarceration as a political prisoner in Robben Island Prison near Cape Town, he had registered for his Bachelor of Arts degree through correspondence and eventually obtained his BA Honours degree in History. In the archival exhibition that the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation (AKF) is launching today is an assignment he had submitted to UNISA on the role of Indian South Africans in the struggle for freedom in South Africa.



Kathrada had an abiding interest in South African liberation history. Of particular concern to him were the innumerable historical errors made by journalists, academics and historians when writing about aspects of the struggle against apartheid and the fight for freedom and democracy. Initially after his release from prison in October 1989, he attributed these mistakes to the fact that the highly repressive apartheid government had banned the ANC; detained, imprisoned, banned and forced into exile many leaders of the broader Congress movement; banned and censored newspapers, books and journalists and ensured ‘thought

control' in society at large. Consequently, people would not know many things about the liberation struggle and its leaders.

But over the years after the unbanning of the ANC and the transition to a constitutional democracy in our country, he had come to accept that the problem may be poor scholarship on the part of historians and sloppy journalism by print and social media journalists. What irked him more was when some senior activists, veterans and leaders of the liberation movement, among them were some who were closely associated with him, overstated and at times exaggerated their contributions to the freedom struggle in our country. Some claimed heroic achievements about what they did in the ANC underground or in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. Some claimed to be leading activists when they played only a marginal role in the struggle. At times such historical embellishment by his fellow comrades would irritate him, but Kathy being 'Kathy', would turn a blind eye as he was not one who courted controversy. Privately he would tell us that the "comrade is adding *masala* (hot spicing) to his story".

Kathrada, as with Laloo "Isu" Chiba whose historical collection is also housed at this archive, was meticulous in his recording of the history of liberation struggle. He would verify every fact believing that historical accuracy was important for the present and future generations. He and Chiba would talk animatedly about the past. Kathy would at times forget details of their past, but Isu had a photographic memory. As an example, Isu would say, "If my memory serves me correctly, so and so was arrested on Tuesday at four o' clock in the morning on 5 July 1963 at his house on Avenue Road in Fordsburg." That was Isu Chiba – no historical detail would escape his attention. In their own way, the two of them were formidable historians of the liberation struggle in South Africa, and there were many occasions when Kathrada would correct academic and media articles of the freedom struggle before these were published.

We must be ever so grateful that both were conscious collectors of historical records and items. Kathrada had 'scrap' books in prison wherein he would jot down quotations from their study materials, newspapers that were smuggled into their prison cells, *Readers' Digest* etc. They kept copies of their prison letters and notes they made for political discussion sessions and topics that interested them. When the prison authorities searched their cells and seized these recorded items, they ensured that after some time they would steal them from the storage room and hide them again. This was the painful past of prison life. Today, we have the first privilege of seeing some of these precious prison items.

The Kathrada Archival Collection is vast and historically significant. Thankfully, many of the records and documents have been scanned and digitised as part of the preservation of the entire Collection. In the limited time we have today to view it, we

will only get glimpse of its vast scope and scale. As you walk through the Exhibition you will discover the following categories of the Kathrada Collection:

- Kathrada's prison collection – personal prison records, letters and correspondence;
- Rivonia Trial Records;
- Kathrada's Declassified State Records;
- His prison study materials;
- Manuscript collection;
- Collection of his speeches;
- Parliamentary documents;
- Documents relating to the Councils on which he served;
- Kathrada's diaries, office papers, correspondence and emails;
- Kathrada's estate collection;
- Kathrada's photographic collection;
- A selection of the books in his personal library;
- Kathrada's awards, certificates of merit, seasonal messages, birthday cards; and
- Audio-visual recordings of Kathrada

If any historian wishes to plough through these records, it will take several months to do so.

In addition to the Kathrada Collection, we have a **Struggle Heroes' Collection** of documents, records and artefacts that were donated to the AKF Archives by Laloo "Isu" Chiba, Shirish Nanabhai, Rahima Moosa, Abdul Kadir Saloojee, Rita Ndzanga, Moosa "Mosie" Moola, Prema Naidoo, "Baboo" Nagdee, Sunny Singh, Suren Sukha, Abdul Rahman Dawood, Neeshan Balton, Zarina Motala and Ismail Vadi.

For an ordinary person a historical document may seem to be lifeless and without value, not so for the historian. But we are not all historians. In the Archives you will see a collection of "Struggle T-Shirts" that were silk-screened and printed in the 1980s; beautiful photographs of the life and times of Ahmed Kathrada; samples of the Awards, Medals and Gifts bestowed on him; and some paintings and frames depicting his lively and humble personality. There is also a Poster Collection of anti-apartheid meetings and campaigns organised in the 1980s and the priceless collection of the Annual Ahmed Kathrada Calendars printed from 2013 to this year.

An archival collection of this kind is not possible without a dedicated team. Allow me to acknowledge the quiet, unrecognised and patient archival work done by Shaheda Seedat, Yasmin Moosa and Jacques Bona, as well as Razia Saleh from the Nelson Mandela Foundation. This is not an effort that is immediately and publicly recognisable. Their work is hardly ever visible, except on a day such as today. With

limited financial and technological resources, they have made an invaluable contribution in preserving the historical legacy of Ahmed Kathrada and his associates. This is not for today only. Rather, if protected and preserved with care, future generations will benefit from these historical collections and artefacts, and they will interpret our humble contributions to the noble struggle for freedom and democracy in South Africa.

As we mark 70 years of the existence of Lenasia, Lenz70 is proud to have partnered with the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation in launching this archive.