

# Isaac Makopo

A humble, dedicated and selfless revolutionary



Ahmed Kathrada  
Foundation  
Deepening Non-Racialism

# Lives of Courage Project



*Anti-apartheid veterans, including Isaac Makopo, Abdulhay Jassat, Ahmed Kathrada and Denis Goldberg, and their families at an event hosted at the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg. Photo: Fakir Hassen*

*Compiled by Zaakirah Vadi*

## **Acknowledgements**

*The Ahmed Kathrada Foundation acknowledges the following people for their contribution to this project:*

*Kabelo Kemp, Zenzile Mavuso, Shaheda Seedat, Yasmin Moosa, Goolam Mayet, Neeshan Balton*

*Ismail Vadi, Joe Raman, Ace Mokoeyana, Kenneth Mashele,*

*the ANC's Isaac Makopo Branch and*

*the Makopo family.*

# Foreword



*Neeshan Balton*

There are few stories that contain daring adventure, revolutionary sacrifice, undying loyalty, monk-like simplicity and over half a century of dedication to a particular cause. The story of Isaac Makopo is one of them.

When the ANC's Isaac Makopo Branch approached the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation to embark on this project to mark the 84th birthday of 'Comrade Kopsy', as he is fondly known, we could not refuse.

This is because Isaac Makopo's story epitomises what the concept of volunteerism and activism is all about.

At a time when our country's political landscape has been sullied with state capture, corruption, a sense of entitlement, a lack of accountability and a lack of understanding of what it means to be a public servant, Isaac Makopo's story has very important lessons. His political principles and values stand in stark contrast to the examples that we have seen and read about so often in recent years.

His story is characteristic of an era where service meant just that – service; and where the freedom and dignity of all South Africans was the primary objective.

That people like Comrade Makopo still remain within our ranks, interacting with activists on a daily basis, gives us hope that his values will be passed on to the next generation of South Africans whose duty it will be to take forward his dreams for a free and equitable society.

During his lifetime, Ahmed Kathrada would often say that people concentrated too much on the stories of those who were imprisoned on Robben Island at the expense of preserving the history of others who fought heroically within South Africa and in exile.

Through this booklet, we hope to record a small but significant part of that history – the story of one Isaac Makopo – who left the country for military training as a young man, and returned home 31 years later, only to continue serving, without the slightest expectation of personal gain.

It is a remarkable story – the heroics of which has an almost movie-like feel to it. When reading it, take the time to remind oneself that it is indeed a true story. In doing so, one will undoubtedly be inspired by the selfless and dedicated character of Isaac Makopo.

***Neeshan Balton***

*Executive Director – Ahmed Kathrada Foundation*

*19 April 2018*

## Early life

Isaac Makopo was one of nine children born on 21 April 1934 to Reverend David Makopo and Maria Mnyakeni. Both David and Maria came from Limpopo Province, and had settled down in Balfour in what is today Mpumalanga Province.

Being born into what he describes as a “poor peasant family”, much of Isaac’s early life was spent moving from “one poor farm to another”.

In 1939, his family settled on a plot near the mining town of Nigel in Gauteng Province, then known as the Transvaal. The land belonged to an English lady by the name of Mrs Sinclair, whose husband was one of the directors at a nearby mine. After her husband’s passing, Mrs Sinclair had remained on the land, and had taken to allocating plots to families, who in turn worked for her on an informal basis.

Over and above assisting Mrs Sinclair with household chores, the Makopos invested in cattle and agricultural farming. Having sent their older children to school, and with the younger ones too small to assist on the farm, Isaac – who was somewhat in the middle – was kept at home to help his father plough the land and look after their cattle.

He recalls: *“I started my schooling at the age of 13. In fact, I would have started even later than that, or I would never have gone to school, if it was not for my mother. My father refused that I go to school. He said, ‘Who is going to look after the cattle? Who is going to help me?’ In December 1946, finally, my mother said, ‘I will have to look after your cattle. I will have to help you plough. My child must go to school!’”*

Isaac started his schooling at Charterston Junior Primary School, some 20 miles away from home.

*“We would wake up in the morning and wash. My brother and I would go to the kraal and milk some five or six cattle before we’d leave. We’d then put on our uniform and run to school, at times without shoes. That was life, we didn’t feel it.”*

Having been placed in Mrs Mogale’s Sub A class, Isaac was given a slate to write on, before progressing to an exercise book, a novelty reserved for higher grades only. He progressed quickly though, and on two occasions, was promoted to the next grade mid-year.

Things would change drastically for the Makopos by 1950. An increasingly repressive apartheid government, elected into power in 1948, would introduce a set of laws designed to systematically disempower black South Africans. The Stock Limitation Act introduced during this period meant that the Makopo family could keep only six of their 30 cattle, having to sell the rest. At the same time, the land on which African



*The tombstone unveiling ceremony of Isaac Makopo’s parents, which he could not attend as he was in exile. Photo: Makopo family album*

families like the Makopos were living on was sold to individual white farmers by the mining company that owned it.

Isaac recalls, “We were shifted to somewhere else and the fields, which my father had worked so hard – and they were very fertile – we lost those. We had to start from scratch. Life started becoming very, very difficult and my parents decided to move to Johannesburg and forget about living on farms. My elder brother, sister and I remained behind with relatives until the end of 1951. After writing our exams, we then left for Johannesburg. I had completed until Standard 4.”

The Makopos took up residence at Albertonsville informal settlement in Soweto, and Isaac completed Standard 5 and 6 at Moroka Central Community School. He thereafter completed his Standard 8 at Orlando High School.

But times were tough. His elderly parents were no longer working, and Isaac was repeatedly sent home from school because he could not afford the fees. With only his elder brother working, Isaac’s parents informed him that he would have to leave school and earn a living. One of his sisters, who also left school, took up dressmaking, while he worked at the canteen at a sweet factory under a Mrs Kruger.

He subsequently found work at Phillips Electrical Engineering as a spray painter and coil winder.



Isaac Makopo's sister Elizabeth and his daughter Masechaba. His other siblings were: Elinah, Paulina, Paulina's son, Edward Tommy (who was more like a brother), Philmon, Johannes Tshukudu, Paulos, Martha and Siphon Essau. Philmon, Johannes Tshukudu and Paulos were also active in the ANC.  
Photo: Makopo family album

**“We would wake up in the morning and wash. My brother and I would go to the kraal and milk some five or six cattle before we’d leave. We’d then put on our uniform and run to school, at times without shoes. That was life, we didn’t feel it.”**



A more recent picture of Isaac Makopo's shoes. Photo: Zenzile Mavuso.

## Political awakening

**B**y 1954, Isaac Makopo came into contact with three elderly, self-employed plumbers who changed the trajectory of his life.

The three men, despite the illiteracy, were very good plumbers, and had been sub-contracted into doing work in the newly developed areas of Soweto. There came a point though, where they had to measure pipes and do some calculations, and they were having difficulty.

One of the men, who knew the Makopos, requested that Isaac teach them arithmetic.

*"Every day when I came from work, I would go to one of their houses, and I would teach them. They were all ANC (African National Congress) members. The branch where we were staying in Dlamini 1, held its meetings on Thursdays. Every Thursday, when I would get to their houses, they would say, 'No teacher, today we are going to an ANC meeting.*

*Can we ask you not to continue with classes?' I said, 'Fine, I have no problem, I'll go home.' But they said, 'No, why don't we go together to the meeting? I started going to branch meetings with them."*

Isaac came into contact with an elderly activist from the branch, who took him under his wing.

*"There was one old man, Johannes Ngwenya – he was short, and very active, he never moved slowly, and would shout, 'Ayibuye!' For some reason, I don't know why, he just chose me to attend rallies and meetings with him at the City Hall steps over the weekends. He would pass home and would just call me 'Volunteer' – 'Volunteer, asihambe meeting ese town (Volunteer, come, we're going for a meeting in town)'. I would tell him that I didn't have train fare, but he would say that I should not worry about it. At the City Hall steps, we would be given the 'New Age' newspaper and ANC and SACTU*

*(South African Congress of Trade Unions) pamphlets and we would sell it to people there. That's how I started getting closer to politics."*

By early 1957, Isaac was still not officially an ANC member. He had taken seriously ill and was hospitalised. Yet the ever caring and enterprising Johannes Ngwenya took it upon himself to visit the young man who had frequented the City Hall steps with him, and

soon after Isaac returned home, in May of the same year, he became an ANC member.

He later boasted to an old school friend, Peter Mthembu, that he had a membership card, influencing him to also join the ANC. This very Peter Mthembu would in later years be arrested and serve time on Robben Island.



*Isaac Makopo's involvement in the ANC spans over 60 years.  
Photo: Makopo family album*

## Branch and underground work

Within a few months of joining the ANC, Isaac was co-opted onto the Dlamini branch executive committee as deputy secretary, and was later elected as secretary.

He soon became the branch's 'chief volunteer'.

*"Volunteers wore black berets and khaki suits. Women wore khaki shirts and black skirts. Volunteers were the core of the ANC. At conferences, when they call for volunteers, any problem – volunteers would be there to solve it. When we'd go on campaigns, you'd just see black berets and khaki suits and black skirts. So I had become the head of the branch's volunteers."*

Isaac was part of various national campaigns of the ANC, including the bus and potato boycotts, 1960s pass burning campaign and the successful three-day national strike in 1961. It was during this strike that Isaac was stationed near a railway crossing with the "lion-hearted" Andrew Mashaba from the ANC's Chiawelo branch. Mashaba took on hundreds of people who were approaching the pair on foot en route to work, half cajoling and half threatening them to turn back and go home, in support of the stay-away. Mashaba would later

play a significant role in Isaac's life.

While the 1950s saw a marked increase in mass protest action against the apartheid state, by the mid-1960s, the regime became ever more ruthless in clamping down on political activism. It carried out a series of arrests of political leaders and ANC activists throughout the decade that would create a leadership vacuum in the ANC.

This was preceded by the banning of the ANC and other liberation movements after the Sharpeville Massacre. ANC Branches and structures were dissolved and members were instructed to work underground.

Isaac was part of one of the newly constituted 'seven men committees', established to execute directives from underground structures and keep in touch with what was happening at a grassroots level.

They were tasked with forming residents' associations and co-ordinating activities through civic organisations that were not openly aligned to the ANC.

In 1961, Isaac attended the All-in African Conference,



Isaac Makopo and fellow comrades at the launch of the MK Military Veterans Association in later years. Photo: Makopo family album

which was addressed by Nelson Mandela, who seized the opportunity to attend a public gathering after the state had forgotten to renew his banning orders. His speech, Isaac says, hinted at armed struggle, with Mandela constantly asking what would be the next step now that the ANC had been banned.

Mandela subsequently went underground and would in the following weeks, in a media interview, detail why the ANC had been considering armed methods of struggle beyond passive resistance and non-violence.

On December 16, 1961 Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, was launched with a series of bomb blasts, accompanied with posters and pamphlets announcing the existence of the organisation.

Isaac was given a special task by Rivonia Trialist Andrew Mlangeni, who had not been arrested as yet.

*"You wouldn't decide at the that time that you wanted to join MK, as MK was a top secret. Who would you go to to say that you wanted to join MK? That person would ask, 'What is MK and who told you that I am MK?' You were approached.*

*"I was approached by Comrade Andrew Mlangeni. He came to me and wanted to know where was my friend Peter (Mthembu), and I told him that Peter would probably be sleeping. He said, 'Let's go and wake him up.' He gave us a stack of leaflets and told us that if we were to be arrested, we would be in serious problems. It was big pile and he told us that they had to be distributed before the end of the night. It was December 16, 1961. The pamphlets announced the launch of MK. We ran for hours, the two of us – Comrade Mlangeni said no third person should distribute the leaflets. We were still young and energetic. If gates were open, we would push the leaflet underneath the door. If gates were locked, we would just throw it in the yard. We did this until we finished the whole pile. We went to sleep at around 2am."*

## Onto military training

It was not long before Andrew Mashaba, the "brave" activist who was paired with Isaac during the 1961 national strike, approached him to go for military training.

*"Andrew Mashaba, not that he told me so, belonged to the underground regional structure of MK. He approached me in 1962 and said that there is a decision by 'ANC underground' that our cadres must go abroad for military training.. He said, 'Now I'm asking if you will agree to go for military training. But before you say yes or no, this is a top secret. If you say yes, you tell nobody; if you say no, still, you will tell nobody that you were ever approached.' I said, 'Of course I'm going!'"*

Two days before his departure, he resigned from Phillips Electrical Engineering, telling his boss that his father had acquired a farm and that he was going to run it.

At home, he packed his bag "bit by bit" so that no one would notice, and simply disappeared. He left behind his girlfriend, baby of 11 months, his aged parents and siblings without a word of his whereabouts. It would be three decades later that he would return.

Smuggling cadres in and out of the country at the time was complicated process, made difficult by the fact that neighbouring states were not yet independent. This meant that cadres would have to travel clandestinely through "hostile territory". After leaving home, Isaac proceeded to the double storey 'White House', now painted pink, in Mzimhlophe, Soweto, where he was briefed. The house belonged to a relative of Rivonia Trialist, Elias Motsoaledi. It would be from here that he would depart on a journey that would take him across the African continent.

## Journey to Dar es Salaam

Isaac and his old school friend, Peter Mthembu, were among the 32 ANC cadres from different parts of the country who left on 23 June 1962 for Bechuanaland. The group came to form what was in later years known as the Luthuli Detachment.

*"We left for Bechuanaland in three combies driven by Indian comrades. When we were in Krugersdorp, we came across a road block. The police wanted to know where we were going. We said that we were a football team and that we were going to play football in Mafikeng. They let us pass."*

At the border post, the 32 cadres jumped the fence some distance away from the immigration officers, while the three combies passed through unhindered – the drivers claimed to be

merchants selling the second-hand clothing that was packed in the bags stowed in their vehicles. Along the road, they picked up the 32 cadres and proceeded to Lobatsi, staying at the home of Ntwaesele 'Fish' Keitseng. Keitseng, a Motswana activist, was a Treason Trialist and member of the ANC, who was deported from South Africa.

The group then proceeded by train to Palapye to the house of a fellow activist, Mpho Motsamai, who was also deported from South Africa.

*"That evening, we got into a truck that took us to the bush in the surrounding areas of Francistown. We had no money, except for a few rands. While we were in the bush, there*



Isaac Makopo and fellow MK cadres at a meeting held post-1994. Photo: Makopo family album

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came Joe Modise with a bag full of British pounds. There were two comrades with us who were our leaders, appointed at the 'White House': Johnny Makatini and Joseph Jack. But Joe Modise instructed them to separate from us, as the police were looking for them and if they were found with us, this would put us all in trouble. Each of us was given an amount of money. We were told that if we encountered any problems, such as police arrests, each one must find his own way. And, there's no going back to South Africa. When we left, we did not know where we were going to – Joe Modise informed us that we were going to Tanganyika. Tanganyika is the present Tanzania."

The group of now 30 were transported by truck, before crossing a fence into Southern Rhodesia. They were then taken in vans owned by a certain Mr Nkomo, who was known to ferry people to Bulawayo at a cost. In Bulawayo, the group was hosted at a hotel by member of the Zimbabwean African Peoples Union (ZAPU), who had already been briefed about the "semi-tourists, semi-fugitives" from South Africa.

The group left the next day via train to Lusaka, in what was then Northern Rhodesia, where they surprisingly bumped into their two former companions, Johnny Makatini and Joseph Jack. The party waited two days at the Lusaka railway station, unsure about how next to proceed to Tanganyika. In the process, they

raised the interest of the railway police. This time, the group pretended to be a football team from Bulawayo, whose hosts didn't arrive to pick them up. Ndebele, which is spoken in Bulawayo is similar to isiZulu and isiXhosa, and the Lusaka guards, who spoke a different language, were none the wiser.



*Isaac Makopo left South Africa in his 20s and returned in his 50s. He is seen here in exile.  
Photo: Makopo family album*

Eventually, an activist from the United National Independence Party (UNIP) was contacted to pick up the 32 cadres, who were cramped into the back of a truck with three drums of crude oil. They were told not to stand up in the truck during the 48 journey that followed to avoid tempting lions from jumping onto the vehicle!

The group was dropped off at a village, where they were allocated a guide, who subsequently led them along a footpath that separated then Northern Rhodesia from Tanganyika. Tanganyika was already independent at the time, and after crossing into the country, the group presented themselves to immigration officials.

After a moment of apprehension at hearing that the "Special Branch" would be called in to register their names,

the group was assured that the Tanganyika Special Branch members were very different to their counterparts in apartheid South Africa.

It wasn't long before the 32 cadres arrived in Dar es Salaam, where they were received by then ANC Deputy President, Oliver Tambo.

## Journey to Morocco and the Soviet Union



A more recent photo of Isaac Makopo sporting a Russian hat. Photo: Zenzile Mavuso

The 32 cadres were split into two groups. Some would travel to Ethiopia and others to Morocco. Isaac and his friend Peter Mithembu were in the Morocco contingent.

They travelled by truck to Nairobi in Kenya, before catching two hired Mercedes Benz taxis to Kampala in Uganda. From there, they proceeded to Juba in Southern Sudan.

Isaac recalls, *"We thought our people were suffering, but what we saw in Juba... We knew that there was a disease called malnutrition and kwashiorkor. We saw it practically there. You'd pass a child, less than a year, some sleeping on their backs, their stomachs on their spines. You'd only see ribs. It was a painful thing. These children would have green flies on their faces...it was a pathetic sight."*

The group left the famine stricken town several days later, taking a ferry along the Nile to North Sudan.

*"It took almost a week to reach our destination. The Nile is big. There are places where you look at it and you don't see where it ends – it's broad. At certain stations, the ferry would stop and people would go out and buy food. You'd buy a goat and slaughter it on the ferry!"*

The contingent subsequently embarked on a train journey to Khartoum.

*"We had a briefcase full of money. That briefcase disappeared. Now at the station, it's fast, with people saying, 'The train is leaving, the train is leaving.' Some of us went into the train and some were handing over luggage. When we were deciding where to sit, we said, 'Hey, where is the briefcase?' The briefcase was nowhere to be found. There was a particular Comrade Boyce, who was very stubborn. He noticed an Arab woman with a long dress, and the briefcase was underneath. Comrade Boyce looked at it, and went for it. We were in*

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*trouble. The group of men who were with her wanted to beat us up. We were told, 'How dare you put your hands under a woman's dress!' We stood our ground and said, 'Why must she put our briefcase underneath her dress?' In the end, they cooled down and we were saved. Otherwise we would not have had food for days."*

From Khartoum, the group took an Air France flight using Tanganyika travel documents to Paris. It was Isaac's first time on an aeroplane. From Paris, they were transported to Marseilles by a high-speed luxury train, and caught a flight to Casablanca in Morocco. They then proceeded via bus to Rabat.

*"Comrade Johnny Makatini was already in Rabat as the ANC representative there. He received us and put us up at a hotel. From there, we were taken to a village outside Rabat in a very cold area surrounded by mountains. The food we were given there was filthy. There was no plate that we would get that would not have two or three flies in it. We couldn't do anything about it. We had to eat."*

Johnny Makatini took note of the conditions and complained to the Moroccan government. Before long, the group, without being told where they were being taken, were hastily packed up by soldiers. They drove for hours on end before being taken to a "far better military camp", where they were trained in guns – first by a sergeant who only spoke French, and later by a lieutenant, who had been to America, and could communicate in English.

Having completed their training several months later, the group left for Marrakesh before travelling by ship to the port of Gibraltar. The 23 day journey that followed on board the Queen Elizabeth II took them via Egypt and Aden back to Dar es Salaam.

*"We were told when we left South Africa that we were going out for six months and that in six months we would be back fighting. While on the ship, we had heard about the Rivonia arrests. When we got to Dar es Salaam, we then confronted OR Tambo and told him that we wanted to go home. He asked us if we had not heard about Rivonia and the arrest of MK's top leadership. He said, 'Now, you want me to just throw you blindly into South Africa. I cannot do that. I cannot throw you into the lion's den. I don't know who will receive you there, because the people who were preparing to receive you are in jail. Who is to give you guns to fight? Who is going to give you food? Who is going to hide you? Over my dead body; I will not send you home!' Now we were stuck."*

By this time, Isaac's parents knew of his whereabouts. Tambo had allowed the cadres to, before their trip to Morocco, write home. The letters were posted from London. Isaac's family would inform him decades later that they had in fact received the letter.

He says, *"What was important was the liberation of South Africa – to get our lives, our country out of racist hands. Parents and anyone else, you would of course remember them, but not to the extent to question why you had done this."*

After hearing about the training the group had received in Morocco, the cadres were told that their expertise would be "enough to pull a dummy out of a baby's mouth", and was insufficient to take on the South African Defence Force. They were taken for further training in Moscow in the Soviet Union. Isaac recalls, *"There we were trained. We were trained to start an underground unit of two or three people; setting up units which would not know each other; and in making homemade bombs."*

## Years in exile

Isaac returned from the Soviet Union to Dar es Salaam. The next 30 years of his life would be spent at MK camps and ANC offices in exile, conducting both underground and diplomatic work in various parts of the African continent.

In 1964, Isaac was sent to Kongwa some 400km away, where the first MK camp would be established. He was appointed the camp's head of logistics, looking into what food, medication, clothing, transport and armaments were required for eventually about 800 to 1000 combatants. In 1966, he was appointed the camp's chief military instructor, responsible for training new cadres from South Africa.

He recalls, "I was a good marksman. I could shoot both manual and automatic guns – AK47s, Kalashnikovs, Papashas, which were sourced from the Soviet Union."

He was subsequently transferred to Livingston in independent Zambia in 1967 for a special intelligence project which would see him operate across the Zambezi River. The project was, however, called off as it had been exposed.

Isaac was then put in charge of training cadres from MK and the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) – the armed wing of ZAPU - in Zambia. The military collusion between the two organisations resulted in the subsequent Wankie and Sipolilo Campaigns.

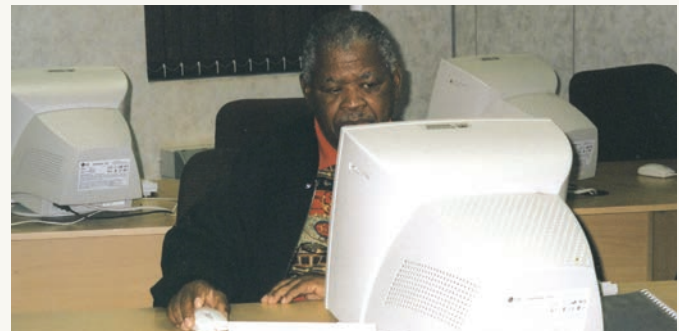
In 1971, Isaac headed what became known as the Makopo Commission to determine how stipends should be allocated to cadres in exile.

In the same year, Isaac's school friend, Peter Mthembu, was sent back into South Africa and was subsequently arrested and jailed on Robben Island.

In 1974, Isaac was appointed the ANC's representative to Botswana, where he established an ANC office and diplomatic links with the country's independent government. The work which he did from Gaborone included clandestinely building underground political and military units that would operate in South Africa, and smuggling arms across the border. He recalls attending meetings with Oliver Tambo in which Tambo would ask the Botswana government – who



Isaac Makopo with Tanzanian officials.  
Photo: Makopo family album



Isaac Makopo would go on to run the ANC's office in Botswana and later became the head of ANC's logistics across several African countries. Photo: Makopo family album

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like other frontline states would have been under enormous pressure to co-operate with apartheid South Africa - "to close one eye" to the ANC's activities in their country.

It was during his time in Botswana that Isaac reconnected with some of his relatives from South Africa, who would visit him there.

Isaac would spend nine years in Botswana before receiving word that he was to hastily return to Lusaka.

*"I received a call from the Secretary-General of the ANC, Alfred Nzo, asking me to urgently report to headquarters in Lusaka... Upon arrival I was told by the Secretary General that the Botswana government had sent an envoy to Lusaka to recall me from Botswana. The reason given by the Botswana government was, 'According to our intelligence, your representative's days are numbered in Botswana. The South African police agency is on his heels. It's a matter of days. The enemy is going to take him, dead or alive.' I was given a week to pack and make arrangements for the maintenance of our office and those of our people who were working underground in Botswana. I remember driving to Zambia with all my things on Christmas eve, 1983."*

In Zambia, Isaac was put in charge of the ANC's travel section.



*Isaac Makopo recalls travelling from Botswana to Zambia on Christmas eve in 1983 after being told that the apartheid police planned to either arrest or kill him in Botswana. Photo: Makopo family album*

He was also elected chair of the ANC's Regional Political Committee and was later appointed to head the Department of National Logistics responsible for Zambia, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. He was also appointed to the ANC's People's Tribunal to hear cases of cadres accused of colluding with the apartheid regime.

During this period, he was responsible for co-ordinating with the Swedish International Development Agency and the Norwegian Development Agency.

*"Before those meetings, we had to prepare our requisitions. I would have to determine how many tons of rice, for instance, I would need to supply our people in Zambia, Tanzania, Angola and Mozambique; how many bales of clothing we would require for the next year; how many cars would the ANC need to buy for the next period and how much rent would be needed per region."*

It was during his time in Zambia that Isaac first met Jenny Daka at a tennis court. He bumped into her again accidentally at the Lusaka City Council, where she worked, and they struck up a friendship.

She would marry him several years later, moving with him back to South Africa at the dawn of democracy.



*Isaac Makopo marrying Jenny Daka, whom he had met in Zambia. Photo: Makopo family album*

## The return home

Isaac was not particularly pleased about staying on in Tanzania after almost everyone had returned to South Africa in the early 1990s.

He had returned to South Africa for a brief meeting in 1990, and met several of his family members for the first time since he had left the country. His parents had already passed on in the 1970s.

*"By 1991, everything was closing down and people were returning home. I had written my reports and was ready to return, only to receive a letter from the office of the Secretary-General that read that I had been appointed director of the ANC settlements in Mazimbu and Dakawa in Tanzania. I was angry and didn't know what to do. My hopes of going home were shattered. I was asking myself if I should refuse, and my conscience said, 'No, I can't refuse. It's an appointment and you must take it up.'"*

Despite his protestations that the settlements were educational – it included the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College – and that he was not an educationist, Isaac was still put in charge and told that he was there in an administrative capacity.

From 1992 to 1993, Isaac was instructed to sell up some of the ANC's movable assets in Tanzania, including most of its cattle. The well-equipped hospital and homes that were built by the ANC were to be handed over to the Tanzanian government as is.



*A recent photo of Isaac Makopo entering his house in Vlakfontein, Gauteng. Photo: Zaakirah Vadi*

After rounding up the ANC's affairs in Tanzania in 1993, Isaac finally returned home to Dlamini, Soweto, where he met his long-time friend, Peter Mthembu. Years before, it was Isaac who influenced him to get his ANC membership card. In a twist of fate, it was Peter this time round, who issued Isaac with his new ANC branch membership card.

During the many years spent in exile, ANC cadres were waiting for the moment when they would be infiltrated back into the country to participate in large-scale guerrilla warfare. This did not materialise. When asked if his military training and years spent in MK camps were in vain, Isaac replies, *"They were not in vain because the negotiations itself were as a result of those MK camps. If there*

*were no MK camps and armed incursions inside the country, coupled of course, with political (mass) work, there would have been no negotiations."*

# Rebuilding a democratic South Africa

**A**fter the excitement of the first democratic elections in 1994, Isaac was employed at the ANC Lenasia parliamentary office as a labour officer. There he worked with ANC MPs, Ahmed Kathrada, Laloo Chiba, Ismail Vadi and Dr RAM Saloojee.

In 1996, he was elected as the first Chairperson of the MK Military Veterans' Association. He served as a Trustee of the MK Trust which had raised funds for the education of dependents of MK cadres who had died in exile and in South Africa.

He also served on the South African Road to Democracy Trust Board, as well as on the Special Pensions Board.

He is serving his second term on the Gauteng Provincial Executive Committee of the ANC Veteran's League. He is also on the ANC's Provincial Disciplinary Committee.

While the post-1994 period has seen a continuation of Isaac's activism, it has also been a difficult period for him.

He lost his wife and mother of his two younger daughters Jenny in 1997. He was without a house of his own for years, renting from place to place, and at some point lived at the Thembelihle informal settlement in Lenasia. Recently, the ANC in Ward 122 ensured that a house was built for him in Vlakfontein, where he now lives.

When asked if his unbroken service for over 60 years was worth it, bearing in mind that there wasn't any real monetary gain to be made out of it, his reply was:

*"When we were coming back from exile, there was the issue of employment. I remember comrades in the ANC's*

*department of treasury saying that when we come back, we must be guaranteed that we are going to work in the treasury at headquarters back home. My argument was, 'None of us signed a contract with the ANC that when we go back home, we will have houses, we will have employment. Personally, I volunteered to go and train, fight and liberate my country from the clutches of apartheid and racism. If I had signed a contract, I would demand that, but I can't – it was voluntary. Everyone who joined the ANC, joined voluntarily. There was no issue of being compensated after the struggle. Why must we be compensated?' This was my position, and it is still my position."*

Today, despite remaining a loyal member of the ANC, Isaac says that he is "disappointed" at what is taking place within the organisation. *"It's what disappoints all genuine members of the African National Congress. Things have not been going well in the ANC itself. The Gupta matter, and all those issues, are things that should never have happened."*

Yet he says he does not regret dedicating his life to the ANC: *"It's like giving everything to your parents and in the end, there's divisions: one parent goes this way, the other goes that way. They remain your parents whether one is wrong and the other is right. The fact of the matter is that I belong to the ANC and I've given all my life to it."*

He is adamant though, that South Africa requires a committed and accountable leadership collective to solve the myriad challenges facing the country, including poor service delivery, crime, corruption and unemployment.

*"Delivery cannot be achieved in one day, or ten years' time. It is an ongoing process. Unemployment cannot be solved*

## Isaac Makopo - A humble, dedicated and selfless revolutionary

overnight. Will government ever be able to solve the issue of 'squatter camps' or land grabbing because people don't have houses? I personally don't believe that there is any government that can build houses for everybody once and for all... So it is a process. But, it is a process that requires committed, serious leadership – committed to the development of this country and committed to service delivery for our people, who have been disadvantaged for centuries."

When asked if there is one thing that stands out for him about his life, Isaac says, "If there is anything really that stands out and I'm proud of it – I'll be proud until I get to my grave – it's the sacrifices and commitment to the struggle of our people as

a cadre of the African National Congress. I have no regrets. Even if tomorrow, I have to sleep with an empty stomach, I would not regret it. I will just say that I am one of those South Africans who are in this position."

In honour of this dedicated and selfless revolutionary, the Ward 122 branch of the ANC has recently renamed itself the Isaac Makopo ANC Branch.

It is something that makes the 84 year old revolutionary very proud – a small gesture of appreciation and recognition for a lifetime of dedicated and selfless service to the people of South Africa.



Isaac Makopo served on the South African Road to Democracy Trust Board, an initiative started by former President Thabo Mbeki to document liberation history. Photo: Trevor Fish/ Makopo family album

**Isaac Makopo - A humble, dedicated and selfless revolutionary**



*Isaac Makopo with Lambert Moloj, who was selected with Eric Mtshali to lead their group of 30 MK cadres en route to Tanganyika, after Johnny Makatini and Joseph Jack were instructed to separate from the group.  
Photo: Makopo family album*



*Anti-apartheid veterans Amin 'Doha' Cajee, Ahmed Kathrada and Isaac Makopo in Lenasia. The event celebrated Kathrada's 70th birthday.  
Photo: 'Images of ANC Politics in Lenasia'*



*Struggle stalwarts Barbara Masekela, Isaac Makopo and Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim with former President Kgalema Motlanthe, Gugu Mtshali, and Gauteng MEC for Human Settlements Paul Mashatile. The photo was taken at the funeral of anti-apartheid struggle veteran, Lalloo Chiba in Lenasia in 2017.  
Photo: Zaakirah Vadi*

Isaac Makopo today lives in Vlakfontein with his two daughters, Masechaba and Ndabazana Twambo, and grandchild, Phetohonhle. His wife, Jenny Daka, passed away in 1997. He keeps in regular contact with his first daughter, Maria Lungi, whom he left behind with her mother, Mable Dube, and his own parents when he went into exile in 1962. Maria has four children: Sesi Penelope (late), Lucky, Nkhululeko and Khanyisile. Isaac has two great grandchildren, Tshukudu and Thando.

Photos: Makopo family album



Ndabazana Twambo Makopo as a baby.



Isaac Makopo and his grandchild Phetohonhle.



Maria Lungi Makopo, who Isaac left behind when he went into exile.



Celebrating Masechaba Makopo's birthday.



Isaac Makopo's mother-in-law, Emily Daka.



Isaac and his wife Jenny Daka and guests at their wedding in 1994 in Zambia.



AhmedKathrada  
F o u n d a t i o n  

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Deepening Non-Racialism

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