

In Kliptown

It was one of those scenes that are never forgotten. A wintry sun, a dusty square, cold-eyed detectives with a bit of stubble on the chin, the fluttering of the green, yellow and black, Father Huddleston lean and confident, the row upon row of strong, calm faces, the upturned thumb, the wonderful, swelling roar of Mayi-booooye! And then back to the eager faces -- and the Freedom Charter.

One by one the dates, the slogans, the places are being chalked up. June 26, Or "Freedom In Our Lifetime." Or -- Kliptown.

One can see them crowding in as if it happened yesterday. (Not De Klerk's lame, blind and halt. But, the strong and the brave, the young in heart. Kliptown, June 25 and 26. Remember it, Strydom!

One day the old folk will lift the little ones on to their knees and tell them about Kliptown, that shabby township for Africans outside Johannesburg. There, in 1955, on those memorable two days, the masses came of age.

For ~~the~~ ^{the} delegations ~~came in~~ ^{came in} clumsy lorries that lumbered and rattled

all the way from Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban, the four corners of the land, Strydom probably snored. Why should he worry about a young African, still branded with factory grime, clambering on to an open lorry with 50 others, clutching a blanket and a packet of roughly-hewn sandwiches? Why, indeed? Or the Coloured housewife, scarred with the toil of 20 years in the madam's kitchen? Or the Indian laundry

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the banners were unfurled, & the Congress Colours held high as the delegations moved one after the other ~~worker emerging from his ghetto? Or even the pale-faced student,~~ before its credulous tables and on to the Congress site.

Some never even got through. At Beaufort West, ~~delegation were stopped~~ held by the police.

Volkarust, Emerlo, Winburg, the hand of the law was put up! "Stop!" 60 of Cape Town's dele. spent the weekend in the name of law and order.

Later, when the Special Branch, putting on its biggest turn-out ever, slouched into the delegates' enclosure at Kliptown and squatted on upturned mineral water boxes, the spine-chilling word was whispered: "Treason!" But no one's spine succumbed to the chilling.

[Why? The answer is simple. It was not really unexpected,

yet somehow there was something tremendously thrilling in the way the workers of South Africa came of age suddenly. They grew up, almost overnight. One moment they were angry, scattered, articulate here, inarticulate there. Then all at once they matured. They were angry still, but they were together and they knew what they wanted and how they were going to get it. Angry yet calm, scattered over a vast country yet united. What price tyranny now, Strydom?

For years and years, their leaders had struggled, guided, advised, and now the workers responded. Dadoo in jail, Kotane arrested, meetings, boycotts, demonstrations, the struggle before and the struggle since. And now the vague forms take shape, and the people know their minds.]

The twin aims — election of delegates and collecting demands for the Freedom Charter — ensured that the Congress of the People rested on the widest possible basis. The tramp from door to

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Funday's...
the Minister of
Justice...
he full might of
his police force
the Political Branch
to try to stop
the delegates
getting through.
Road blocks
were put up
& cars &
buses stopped
searched.
Passes, the
receipts &
transportation
certificates were
demanded.
Indian delegates
(from Natal)
were stopped
for Transvaal
entry permits.

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door brought new faces peering out, keen, inquisitive faces. Why? How? When? My demands? Well, let me see. And so it began. The frustration and impotence gave way for hope. The cloudy fury crystallised out. This is what I would like to see, and this, and this.

It was all put down in black and white: the Freedom Charter. Not a document drawn up at a desk, or even in a conference hall; but slowly, laboriously pieced together in homes and factories, on farms and at street corner meetings. It was the soul and spirit of the people, translated into terse sentences.

Then there was the election of delegates -- 2,844 got through to Kliptown. No General Election for the "Whites only" Parliament has produced anything so representative. The meetings to choose the delegates hummed over the length and breadth of South Africa. And meetings mean explanations, advice, guidance. It is like the ripple in the pond.

The two-day Congress of the People, closing in the midst of the provocative police raid on that Sunday afternoon, was a triumphant spectacle. It was a medley of colourful national costumes and waving scarves, of songs and warm comradeship, and of the fluttering of the green, yellow and black. One also had the chance to tell friend from foe: only the Labour Party, of all the Parliamentary parties, sent greetings. The Liberal Party was not there, nor its Native Representatives.

Swart's police were there, of course. They waited for the meeting to begin and then squatted at the rear. But they had underestimated the enthusiasm of the people, ^{who} ~~they~~ continued to arrive,

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and were soon hemming the detectives in and extending 12-deep behind them. Melodramatically, the detectives pulled their brown hats even further over their eyes, and then peered up, revealing just a flicker of nervousness.

But it was obvious that the wholesale rounding up of delegates was not going to achieve its purpose. The delegates were not going to be provoked into violence. They remained calm for a simple reason -- they knew their strength.

They knew. It was as simple as that. They knew what baasskap meant and they knew that they were going to defeat it. They knew what they had suffered, and they knew what lay ahead. There was struggle and bitterness ahead, certainly, but also victory. They had come to Kliptown to do something, and no power on earth could undo it.

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TREASON TRIAL, 1956 1961

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