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LILIAN MASEDIBA NGOYI - A UNIQUE WOMAN

Lilian Ngoyi was already 40 before she entered politics. Within a year ~~or two~~, she was one of the best-known black leaders in South Africa.

Like millions of others, she suffered under a triple oppression - as a black under apartheid, as a worker, and as a woman, in a society dominated by colour and sex discrimination, and scornful of giving its working ~~xxxxxxx~~ people any social security 'benefits'.

Her education was aborted by the need to support her family, her father, a former mineworker, being ill with asthma (one wonders: pthisis?). She worked to support her parents and a younger brother. When I met Lilian, she was still working to support her family. Her father was dead, her husband also, and her dependents were her mother, old and unable to work, her young daughter and an adopted child.

That year, 1952, the African National Congress (~~founded in 1912~~ ^{then} still ~~a~~ legal ~~organisation~~) had launched a campaign in which people voluntarily defied unjust laws as a form of protest. Lilian was moved by the thousands of young men and women going to jail, and joined the Women's League of the ANC. Within a year she was President of the League, a recognition of her magnetic personality and exceptional speaking ability. When the multi-racial Federation of South African Women was formed, she was elected President in 1956.

Together with Dora Tamane from Cape Town, Ms Ngoyi was sent by the Federation to attend a world conference of women. At that time it was not illegal, as it is now, to leave South Africa without a passport; the problem was to get an airline to agree to take you, and to get passed immigration. With some difficulty this was eventually arranged.

Everything Lilian Ngoyi saw and experienced was totally new. This poor, hardworking widow who had lived all her life in black ghettos, treated as something worthless, suddenly entered a world where she was a human being. She saw everything with totally fresh eyes, like a child, yet through the mind of a mature and intelligent woman. She marvelled at the white sheets and luxuries of a hotel, stood amazed at the sight of a white woman (in an English town) on her hands and knees scrubbing a doorstep, and absorbed a picture of the world and human relationships, of politics, class, sex and race structures that most learn from years of reading and study. Her great gift was her ability to transmit to others the wonder, the humour of it all. At

after her return
dozens of meetings she held her audiences spellbound, speaking for three hours or more. We never wanted her to stop.

She was invited to tour socialist countries and all responded to her vitality and warmth. 'We were all sisters,' she told us, 'we laughed together, we sang together - oh, I was so happy!' A visit to a former Nazi concentration camp moved her deeply.: 'I had known what whites could do to blacks, but now when I saw what whites could do to whites, how far discrimination could go, I wept'. She confessed when she returned that previously she had never understood why some of us called for 'peace.' 'How could I have peace in my head when I have war in my stomach?' But seeing the effects of war, she understood.

She came back with the view that there were many similarities between the oppression of women in other societies and that of her own; and that the black woman in South Africa represented a special case of that oppression.

Helen Joseph (secretary of the Women's Federation) and I met her when she returned, at Jan Smuts Airport. As she stepped off the plane and we waved excitedly, a white woman turned to us puzzled and asked: 'Is that your girl?' (Meaning, is that the black woman who works in your home?)

From the time she joined the ANC, Lilian was prominent in all its campaigns. Opposing the Bantu Education Act (designed to limit black education to standards necessary to serve the white economy) she ~~said~~ said the Act would 'turn us black mothers into hens to lay eggs for other people to scramble.'

She was the first woman ever to be elected to the National Executive of the ANC - more than 40 years after its formation. 2 Together with Helen Joseph and two other women, she led a massive demonstration of more than 20,000 women to present hundreds of thousands of signatures protesting against the extension of pass laws to women to the seat of government, Union Buildings in Pretoria. Triumphant over incredible obstacles, women came from all over the country in what was probably the most disciplined and impressive demonstration ever seen (and, of course, the government ensured it could never happen again.)

With 156 leading men and women she was arrested in 1956 and endured the 4-year treason trial. In 1960, during the State of Emergency following the Sharpeville massacres, she spent five months in jail, 71 days of it in solitary confinement. She was banned in 1962, confined to the area where she lived, prohibited from all public activities and from being ~~any~~ quoted, and from gatherings - in

South Africa this means two or more people coming together for a common purpose, which includes even a conversation. As she could no longer work in a garment factory, she struggled to make a living by ~~doing~~ sewing at home. Police watched her home constantly, intimidated customers; there were no shops where she could buy materials. For 11 years she lived like this, then for a brief period the bans expired. Lilian, interviewed by a reporter, gave a vivid account of her hardships, but ~~then~~ rose to her feet to stand straight and declare: 'But my spirits have not been dampened. You can tell my friends all over the world that this girl is still her old self, if not more ~~so~~ mature after all the experiences. I am looking forward to the day when my children will share in the wealth of our lovely South Africa.'

For this fearless and defiant attitude, she was again banned and confined.

For 18 years this brilliant and beautiful woman spent most of her time enclosed in a tiny house, silenced, her great energies totally suppressed. Her heart gave out. More than 2,000 people attended her funeral and young people recited poetry and sang freedom songs. A black newspaper wrote of her: 'As a black woman in South Africa Lilian Ngoyi found herself - as do millions of black women across the land - the victim of both race and sex discrimination. ~~But~~ As a person she demonstrated that it was possible not only to transcend the limits imposed on her in this way, but that the struggle in South Africa could not be successfully waged unless women and women's issues constituted a central part of liberation strategy. She dedicated her life to that . . . demonstrating that neither the State (with all its might) nor mortality could really silence this phenomenal woman.'

For her, wrote an historian, the 'freedom struggle was like a call. As an example of stubborn determination she had few peers.' When the women marched to Pretoria in 1956, they sang a new song, warning the rulers of South Africa:

Now you have touched the women
You have struck a rock,
You have dislodged a boulder,
You will be crushed.

Lilian Ngoyi remains part of the black woman's struggle for ~~human~~ human rights, a unique woman whose life has significance for women everywhere. Go well, Lilian!

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