

23 May 2000.

Ahmed Kathrada  
C/o Tommy Vassen  
71 Stratyre Avenue  
London SW16 4RF

Dear Kathy

I am sorry that I shall not be able to attend the launch of your *Letters from Robben Island*, to which I have been invited, because I shall be in Japan on 2 June.

I am sure that your letters will be an inspiration to many, and a tribute to your courage and that of your comrades in prison.

I was, however, disappointed that you have retained in the book a reference to the evidence given in the trial, I believe by Swanepoel, that I led the police to the Mountain View cottage . Whatever you may have believed at the time, this was a fabrication, and part of a police smear campaign to discredit me. I must ask you to take an early opportunity to publish a notice withdrawing the defamatory reference to me. This could be along the lines of the notice by the publishers of the books by Helen Joseph and Vladimir Shiubin, which you will find on page 3 of the attached document.

This document is an edited version of the notes which I made in May/June 1964.. This has not been published but has been sent to the Mayibuye Centre and the Bram Fischer library.

With good wishes

Yours ever,

# Paul & Adelaide Joseph

'Anand Bhavan'

30 Vineyard Avenue, Mill Hill, London NW7 1HR Tel: (0181) 346-5850

SATURDAY 20TH MAY 2000

DEAR BOB,

Thank for your letter of the 17th inst. received today. I phoned this morning. Thought maybe you are in the garden studying plants & butterflies. It's just an image I have of professors. It is most unlikely we will be at KATHY'S launch as we have a family engagement. It is rare to get them all together.

With regard to your wanting to send a communication to KATHY, I suggest you send it to his friend - TOMMY VASSEN, which is where he will be staying for a few days en-route from Canada, stopping in London for the book launch.

My experience with S.A House has been of incompetence, unreliable & an inability to acknowledge communication from the H.C. down.

(Joel & Vanetta could not get to the Lord Chancellor's luncheon for Nelson because S.A. House sent his invitation the day after the luncheon.)

In the dawn of Apartheid when I wrote a letter of protest or complaint, I would get an immediate reply - even though the reply was unsatisfactory! I am still waiting for the renewal of my S.A. passport. It is now 16 months gone. I must thank British Imperialism for having a UK passport.

Anthony - TOMMY VASSEN  
71 STRATFORD AVENUE  
LONDON SW16 4RF

I phoned Tommy this morning requesting that he please accept a letter for KATHY. He will do that. Enclosed are some reviews of books on SA which I thought you would be interested.

All the best

WARMEST

Paul

**Prof. Bob Hepple**

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**From:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**To:** <bgh1000@cam.ac.uk>  
**Sent:** Friday, June 23, 2000 1:29 PM  
**Subject:** "Letters from R.I."

Dear Bob,

I'm sorry I could'nt reply earlier to your letter and document of 23rd May.

On the assumption that you are not familiar with the background to "Letters from Robben Island" I thought I should give you some relevant information.

Before our release from prison, and incessantly thereafter, I was inundated with requests to publish my letters. I turned down the requests, largely because when I was keeping copies, furthest from my mind was any idea that they would or could be published. I also thought at the time that by and large the contents of the letters were mundane and did not merit publication.

A few years after our release I conceded to a request that copies of the letters be deposited with Michigan State University. This was a way of saying "thank you" to MSU for being the first University in America to disinvest from South Africa.

Towards the latter part of the nineties I finally agreed to MSU publishing the letters. This was over 3 decades after some of the letters were written. Understandably, I had little idea of the contents of the 900 plus letters that I had written.

When agreeing to their publication I did not have the inclination, the energy, nor the enthusiasm or time to go through the mass of letters in order to help select the 80-90 that were published. (In fairness to MSU, they did try - unsuccessfully- to secure greater involvement on my part in the process leading up to the publication). The one thing I did insist on was that there should be NO CENSORSHIP. In my mind at the time were recollections of letters in which I had discussed some of my youthful indiscretions, which I knew would be embarrassing to me; as well as other bits that would embarrass some friends and family members. I cannot now recall if at that stage I was conscious of my reference to you, but I cannot rule out the possibility.

Some additional facts:-

-the book was launched in Cape Town in August, 1999 by President Mbeki, and futher launches in Johannesburg and Durban,

-In September and October of 1999 it was launched in several cities in the United States;

-In May and June of this year there were launches in Chicago, Toronto and London.

One can assume that a fair number of books must have been sold in the year since it was launched.

Taking into account the above information I'm sure you will agree that it is obviously impossible to comply with your specific request to me to "publish a notice withdrawing the defamatory reference to me", as was done in the case of Helen Joseph and Shubin.

What else can be done at this stage? I will consider any alternative suggestion you may have.

Best wishes,

6/24/00

**Prof. Bob Hepple**

---

**From:** Prof. Bob Hepple <bgh1000@cus.cam.ac.uk>  
**To:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**Sent:** Monday, June 26, 2000 7:35 AM  
**Subject:** Re: "Letters from R.I."

Dear Kathy

Thank you for your e-mail and for explaining the circumstances in which the book was edited and published. I am still dismayed that Mayibuye Books allowed their imprint to be attached, apparently without making any check, because as recently as April 1999 Barry Feinberg expressed his apologies and published a retraction of defamatory statements about me in Shiubin's book, after taking advice from George Bizos. I have not as yet written to Mayibuye Books or MSU because I was sure that once your attention was drawn to this you would want to do something about it.

I am glad that you are willing to consider suggestions as to how this can be corrected. My proposal is as follows:

1. Mayibuye Books and MSU should insert an erratum slip in all unsold copies of the book.
2. They should write to all their distributors in all countries where the book has been circulated, including the Africa Book Centre in London, sending them copies of the erratum and asking them to insert it into unsold copies on their shelves.
3. They should publish a prominent retraction and apology in the Weekly Mail and Guardian.
4. They should not reprint the book in any form without the statement in question being removed.

I append below a suggested form of the retraction and apology.

I very much hope that you will agree to ask the publishers to take all these steps. Once I hear from you, I shall be writing to them as well, confirming that I would accept this as a minimum. I must, however, make it clear to them that if the matter is not satisfactorily resolved in this way, I reserve my rights to take proceedings against them. In view of my continuing high regard for you, I have no wish to involve you personally, but I am confident that you will want to ensure that this is put right.

I look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes  
 Yours sincerely,

Bob

Proposed form of notice:

" LETTERS FROM ROBBEN ISLAND: In this book certain allegations were made concerning the conduct of Bob Hepple following his arrest at Rivonia in 1963. Ahmed Kathrada and the publishers now unreservedly withdraw the references to Bob Hepple and accept that he at no time betrayed those with whom he was associated and that he has always acted with propriety and integrity towards them. "

----- Original Message -----

**From:** akathrada  
**To:** bgh1000@cam.ac.uk  
**Sent:** Friday, June 23, 2000 1:29 PM  
**Subject:** "Letters from R.I."

6/26/00

**Prof. Bob Hepple**

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**From:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**To:** <bgh1000@cus.cam.ac.uk>  
**Sent:** Monday, July 03, 2000 11:42 AM  
**Subject:** Kathy

Dear Bob,

I,m sitting in Kathy's flat in Cape Town wondering how best the issues you have raised with him can be dealt with. [We met socially the other day and chatted about the matter - I hope you don't mind my getting involved, but I think it is possible to find a solution that is comradely in the best sense of the term and that both meets your position and strengthens rather than undermines the friendship and warmth that Kathy feels for you].

Kathy has said that the way the editors of his book selected his letters for publication resulted in a number of statements appearing which reflected his thoughts at the time but could be unnecessarily hurtful to individuals mentioned today. Thus he made harsh comments about Fikile Bam [presently head of the Land Claims Court] as well as Neville Alexander. He was also one of those who bitterly opposed Mandela when M. first proposed negotiations. What he would like to do now would be to write an article or do an interview for the Weekly Mail or some other journal indicating how wrong his assessments appear in retrospect. This would include a warm reference to yourself, indicating how much he appreciated the contribution you had made to the struggle in the direst of days. In this way, any negative impression people might possibly have based on reading today what he thought in his prison cell twenty five years ago, would be erased. He thinks, quite correctly I believe, that a formal apology in the press will look exactly like that - a formal apology in the press, extracted by a desire to avoid the expense and unpleasantness of litigation, rather than an expression of genuine feeling. It would be expensive, it would draw attention to and revive a matter which as far as he and the new generation are concerned has been long dead and it would distance you from the very people whose esteem you most appreciate. As far as the book is concerned, it has already been distributed, and in any event, an erratum slip, whatever it said, would point a finger at you in a way that could only be damaging rather than reparative. Kathy is planning to go ahead with the article\interview because it will enable him to say in print what he has been saying against himself at book launches anyhow, but you might like to give him your views. If you want to discuss the matter further with me, you have my e-mail. Otherwise I will see you in October.

Warm regards,  
Albie

7/7/00

**Prof. Bob Hepple**

---

**From:** Prof. Bob Hepple <bgh1000@cus.cam.ac.uk>  
**To:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**Cc:** Maal F/Secretary to Justice Sachs <maal@concourt.org.za>  
**Sent:** Friday, July 07, 2000 5:57 AM  
**Subject:** Re: Kathy

Dear Kathy

I'm grateful for Albie's intervention. I agree with him that it would be far better to have a positive statement from you about my role in the struggle rather than a formal apology. I would like you to make it clear that what you said at the time you wrote in prison was based on misinformation and does not reflect your present views about me. You might not know that apart from being active in anti-apartheid causes in Britain since 1963, I have also been able to contribute to the new South Africa, e.g. by being an expert consultant in the drafting of the Labour Relations Act and Basic Conditions of Employment Act, as a trustee of the Canon Collins Trust, and various other ways. Some positive statement from you might prevent that work being undermined by what was said in your prison letters.

I'd be grateful if you could send me a copy of your article/interview.

I am still dismayed that Mayibuye failed to pick this up before they co-published it. That is something I shall have to take up with them separately.

I greatly value our past comradeship, and, as Albie says I hope this will be a solution which is "comradely in the best sense of the term".

Warm regards  
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7/7/00



**Prof. Bob Hepple**

---

**From:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**To:** <bgh1000@cam.ac.uk>  
**Sent:** 14 August 2000 21:30  
**Subject:** article/interview

Dear Bob,

Thanks for your-mail. I spoke a close (journalist) friend about it. She strongly advised against an interview, because of possible distortion. She said I should rather write an article. This I have done. My best bet is to get it published, if possible, in the Mail and Guardian or the Independent. I've made some contact, but I need to get the right person to ensure that it gets proper coverage.

Unfortunately I've been away for a couple of weeks, and only returned to Cape Town at the end of last week. I hope to finalise it soon.

Best wishes, From, Kathy

22/08/00

**Prof. Bob Hepple**

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**From:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**To:** Prof. Bob Hepple <bgh1000@cus.cam.ac.uk>  
**Sent:** 01 September 2000 10:09  
**Subject:** Re: "Letters from R.I."

Dear Bob,

I havent forgotten about our arrangement. I've been talking to ccouple of media-contacts in order to (1) get their agreement to print, and (2) to print it sothat it is not hidden away. I'm pursuing this; hopefully we'll soon get it right. The immediate response I got from the first contact was:- "Why do you want to deal with something that is not topical and a non-issue.....?" Only after I explained to her, did she undertake to make enquiries and come back to me.

Hope you are well, Regards from AMK.

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Prof. Bob Hepple <bgh1000@cus.cam.ac.uk>  
**To:** akathrada <akathrada@anc.org.za>  
**Date:** 25 June 2000 08:32  
**Subject:** Re: "Letters from R.I."

Dear Kathy

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I look forward to hearing from you.

With best wishes  
 Yours sincerely,

Bob

05/09/00

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**From:** akathrada  
**To:** bqh1000@cam.ac.uk  
**Sent:** Friday, June 23, 2000 1:29 PM  
**Subject:** "Letters from R.I."

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A few years after our release I conceded to a request that copies of the letters be deposited with Michigan State University. This was a way of saying "thank you" to MSU for being the first University in America to disinvest from South Africa.

Towards the latter part of the nineties I finally agreed to MSU publishing the letters. This was over 3 decades after some of the letters were written. Understandably, I had little idea of the contents of the 900 plus letters that I had written.

When agreeing to their publication I did not have the inclination, the energy, nor the enthusiasm or time to go through the mass of letters in order to help select the 80-90 that were published. (In fairness to MSU, they did try -unsuccessfully- to secure greater involvement on my part in the process leading up to the publication). The one thing I did insist on was that there should be NO CENSORSHIP. In my mind at the time were recollections of letters in which I had discussed some of my youthful indiscretions, which I knew would be embarrassing to me; as well as other bits that would embarrass some friends and family members. I cannot now recall if at that stage I was conscious of my reference to you, but I cannot rule out the possibility.

Some additional facts:-

-the book was launched in Cape Town in August, 1999 by President Mbeki, and futher launches in Johannesburg and Durban,

-In September and October of 1999 it was launched in several cities in the United States;

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05/09/00

Taking into account the above information I'm sure you will agree that it is obviously impossible to comply with your specific request to me to "publish a notice withdrawing the defamatory reference to me", as was done in the case of Helen Joseph and Shubin.

What else can be done at this stage? I will consider any alternative suggestion you may have.

Best wishes,

Sincerely,  
Kathy.

05/09/00

9 June 2000.

Rusty Bernstein  
57 Lock Crescent  
Kidlington  
Oxford OX1 1HF

Dear Rusty

Thanks for your letter.

You are quite right to surmise that my account written in 1964 was inhibited for security reasons – the names of individuals were coded and there was no explicit reference to the CP. I agree that if this were to be published as a serious historical account the role of the Party would need to be made transparent. These were simply personal notes, written at the suggestion of Joe Slovo. I have placed them in the Mayibuye Centre and Bram Fischer library for the benefit of researchers, but not with a view to general publication in this form.

I am gratified by your enduring high regard for my parents and for their contribution , now largely forgotten in South Africa.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely,

DEAR BOB,

THURSDAY 13TH July 2000

I intended contacting you at about the time of the launch of 'KAIHAKI LETTERS from Rotorua Island' but remembered you were on your way to Japan.

I wanted to obtain your permission to ~~use~~ use the letters from Walker Sisulu & JOEL Jille for the review.

I actually wrote the review before the launch but Morning Star were not able to use in time.

I hope you don't mind my having taken advantage of the letters.

Enclosed is a photocopy of the Morning Star review.

On the morning of the review I phoned KAIHAKI at Tommy Vassell's place. He confirmed having received your memoir. I suggested in the light of the two letters which without doubt clear you of the false impression, that he should clear the record.

He said that he had asked the editor to publish 'everything uncensored'. I accepted that may have been so but the editor could have stated the position in a footnote. Instead he said that there were other things said about people which would have to be corrected as well. I pointed out that my suggestion was more of a principled issue.

He then went on to say 'It was BOB who took me to the place' I said that maybe so & that you also took me to the same place.

[You may not remember that we had a So-burg DP meeting w/LE. The next meeting was to be at the same place but neither Piet or Daw turned up. It was the next day I learnt of the Rivonia arrests]

I repeated my suggestion that he say something at the launch. He refused He said he had no intention of doing that. He said he needed 'time to study the letters & discuss it with some people'

I expressed regret & pointed out that Craig Williamson got an amnesty for killing Ruit first.\* He sounded surprised. I told him that whilst I agreed with the principles of re-cconciliation I disagreed

A) That criminals were getting off

B) That Tuin should never have been appointed to the Chair. What can one expect from a man of the cloth.

KATHY responded by saying that it was a Government Commission which could not be interfered with.

I said that is what PALS JORAH said about HRC invitation to the Press but did indicate to me there will shortly be a change. About 3 days later the subpoenas were withdrawn.

Anyhow at the book launch we had a cordial relationship & I introduced him to several people who were involved in the anti-apartheid campaign.

I saw Sid Kariroge there & raised the issue with him. He thought I was absolutely right in taking

the matter <sup>up</sup> with KATHY.

I missed KATHY's telephone call on the afternoon of his departure to SA.

I did however speak to Tommy Vasser. From his tone & brashness it was evident that LEAHY had discussed the matter with him. He asked 'why are you nit-picking' & 'why are you taking upon yourself to do it'.

He did not seem to grasp the principle of the issue, so I tailed off the discussion & raised some of the errors in the editor's foot notes (the editor as you would have gathered is Tommy's brother.) This also did not go down well.

I shall be sending Tommy a copy of the MS review, which I no doubt he will send to KATHY & Bobby.

I shall also be sending it to several other friends in South Africa & here.

Heldaro & I spent 10 lovely days in BARCELONA with some pleasant friends.

A couple of days before our departure, our eldest daughter phoned to tell us that our dear friend Niten Bensusan died.

The funeral was a week later. We attended it with Zoyt, Tanya & Nadia.

I knew Martin for nearly 45 years. We had a wonderful friendship.



4.  
The other old & dear friend Freda Lewson is also not well. She & Mary had an arrangement to write each other's obituaries.

I understand there were 18 obituaries here, SA, UK & Canada. Also heard it on Radio 5 Live.

After the cremation at KENSAL GREEN (where MARY Burial & the companion J. Friedrich Engels is also buried) we went for the celebration at the Tricycle Theatre. There was fun & games as well the shedding of tears.

Mary had a good send off.

We'll be in touch

Regards to you & MARY

Wanmei.

Paul.

\* His surprise was at the news J. the Amnesty was first heard from me. Paul

Paul & Adelaide Joseph  
'Anand Bhavan'  
30 Vineyard Avenue,  
Mill Hill, London NW7 1HR  
Tel: (0181) 346-5850

24th July 2000

Dear Bob,

Thank you for your note with the delightful news that Kathy will put the record straight. That is highly commendable of him. Please keep me posted when he does make public the correction.

We are also very pleased that you have again been honoured by the universities of Cape Town & Wits.

This morning I got a call from Ethel de Keyser expressing pleasure in my taking up the issue through the book review. She is also aware that I had spoken to Kathy. I am not sure whether I told you that Ethel was quite upset at the remarks Kathy made about her brother Jack.

As for the editor foot-noted there are numerous errors, omissions & some blatant exaggerations.

On the whole the book is not exactly riveting. Most of the letters are directed to a limited audience within the South African fraternity for the wider audience most of it would be lost.

The selection of the letters appears to be subjective as the editor seemed to have put in quite a number of letters related to his family, relatives & friends.

Oddly enough I met a friend over the week-end who expressed disappointment in the selection of letters. He is an

outsider — Canadian & a retired first from SOAS.  
 You may remember Mike Feldman. I saw him recently.  
 He was still the same usual.

I felt for the review I had to be a little generous so as  
 to get what I considered a very important & praiseworthy across.

There are a lot of issues which Kathy & the editor raised  
 in the book but that I will next time when we meet.

In the meantime all the best.

Warmest:

Paul.

PS I should mention when I brought up some of the  
 points about errors etc with Tommy, he was rather  
 furious with me. Hopefully when Kathy makes his  
 corrections, Tommy will still be my friend.

PROFESSOR B. A. HEPPLER, Q.C., LL.D.

*The Master*

THE MASTER'S LODGE

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E-mail: bgh1000@cam.ac.uk

Caps

5 January 2001-01-06

The Editor  
Michigan State University Press  
East Lansing  
Michigan 48823-5202  
USA

Dear Editor

**Letters from Robben Island: A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison  
Correspondence 1964-1989, edited by Robert D.Vassen**

As you may know, Mr Ahmed Kathrada has caused to be published in *The Mail and Guardian* October 20 to 26, 2000, a full retraction and apology for a false and defamatory statement concerning me on page 17 of this book published by you. I attach a copy of his statement.

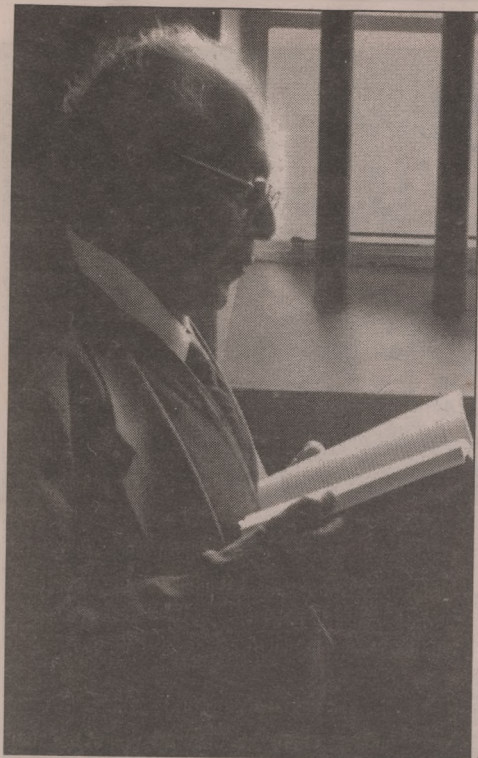
In the light of this, I now seek a written undertaking from you, on behalf of the Michigan State University Press, that you will not continue to publish or republish or circulate this book in the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa and worldwide until the offending passage has been removed or without including the full text of Mr Kathrada's statement as published in *The Mail and Guardian*, and that you will inform all your outlets accordingly.

I expressly reserve my rights to institute legal proceedings for damages, including punitive, exemplary or aggravated damages, in any country in which the book is published.

Yours sincerely,

Cc Mr Robert D.Vassen

714A Wells Hall



Apology for the past: Ahmed Kathrada

# Rivonia man's name cleared

Barry Streek

**R**obben Island veteran Ahmed Kathrada has formally apologised for claiming in a letter written from the prison more than 35 years ago that he suspected former Johannesburg lawyer and prominent British academic Bob Hepple of being a police informer.

Kathrada has written to Hepple stating that he has thought a great deal about the issue, and realised his that suspicions were "irrational and unfair".

"Advocate Hepple has been a worthy friend and comrade, and I had no reason to doubt his integrity. I have been made aware of the valuable work he has done and continues to do. I greatly regret the damage this letter has done to him and extend my apologies to him."

Kathrada's original letter in which he besmirched Hepple was one of more than 900 written by him inside prison, many of which were smuggled out. The letter was selected by

Michigan State University for publication in his recent book, *Letters from Robben Island*.

Hepple, today a master of a college at Oxford University, was arrested on July 11 1963 at the Rivonia farm used by Umkhonto weSizwe as its headquarters.

When Nelson Mandela, Kathrada and other African National Congress leaders appeared in court in October that year, Hepple was released and fled the country without giving evidence, although state prosecutor Percy Yutar had told the court he would be testifying for the state.

In one of Kathrada's letters from Robben Island, he wrote that he was not shocked by the news that his hideaway cottage in Mountainview, Johannesburg, had been given away by Hepple.

"From the first day when we were released from 90-day detention, I suspected him of telling the police more than he admitted.

"What can I do? I suppose these things happen in any struggle. I feel sorry for his poor

wife. She is such a nice girl, and must be taking this very badly."

Kathrada told the *Mail & Guardian* Hepple was distressed by the inclusion of these remarks in his book, and had urged him to clarify the position.

"When I wrote these letters in 1963/4, the idea never crossed my mind that they would be published one day. Naturally, I cannot now recall my state of mind at the time of my remarks.

"I know that right through the three months of solitary confinement and during the trial, the possibility of a death sentence was constantly drummed into our heads."

Kathrada wrote in his apology to Hepple: "Although I harboured an intense dislike for Dr Yutar and some of the security police witnesses, my actual hatred was directed against the informers and state witnesses who had once been our comrades. It was in this atmosphere that I must have believed what Dr Yutar said about Advocate Hepple."

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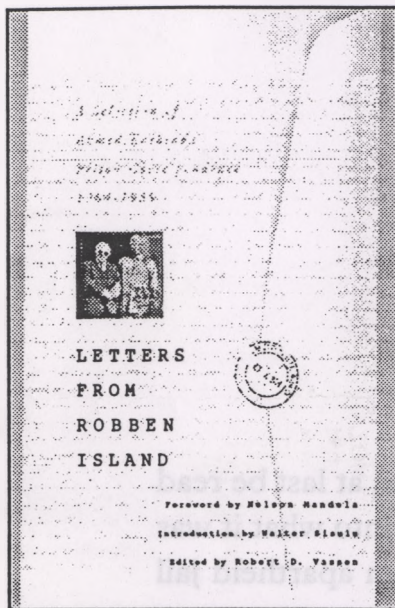


MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

## Letters from Robben Island

Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989

Foreword by Nelson Mandela  
Introduction by Walter Sisulu  
Edited by Robert D. Vassen



Ahmed Kathrada was a member of South Africa's first freely elected parliament (1994) and a parliamentary counsellor from 1994 through 1999.

He is a member of the African National Congress and served 26 years of a life sentence before his release in 1989.

Robert D. Vassen was born in South Africa. He is Associate Director of the English Language Center at Michigan State University. Prior to coming to MSU in 1990, he lived in London, England, where he was an active member of the African National Congress.

Late one night in July 1963, a South African police unit surrounded the African National Congress headquarters in Rivonia and arrested a group of Movement leaders gathered inside. Eventually eight of them, including Nelson Mandela, who was already serving a sentence, Walter Sisulu, Dennis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Andrew Mlangeni, and Ahmed Kathrada, were convicted of sabotage and, on 12 June 1964, sentenced to life in prison. Soon, these men became widely known as the "Rivonia Trialists." Despite their imprisonment, the Trialists played active roles in the struggle against South Africa's racist regime. Instead of being forgotten, as apartheid officials had hoped, they became enduring symbols in a struggle against injustice and racism.

Kathrada and his colleagues were classified as high security prisoners, segregated from others and closely watched. Every activity was regulated and monitored. Among the many indignities visited upon them, the prisoners were prohibited from keeping copies of incoming and outgoing correspondence. Kathrada, or "Kathy" as he is known, successfully hid both.

*Letters from Robben Island* contains a selection of 86 of the more than 900 pieces of correspondence Ahmed Kathrada wrote during his 26 years on Robben Island and at Pollsmoor Prison. Some were smuggled out by friends; others were written in code to hide meaning and content from prison censors. These are among his most poignant, touching, and eloquent communications. They are testimonials to Kathrada, his colleagues, and to their commitment to obtaining human dignity and freedom for all South Africans.

*We are richly blessed in South Africa. People like Kathy have helped because of their lack of bitterness, their magnanimity and generosity of spirit, and willingness to forgive, even after so much suffering. That is why we avoided revenge. In this book we hear how they suffered but transcended the suffering and were purified as in a furnace, removing the dross.*

The Most Reverend Desmond Tutu  
Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town

Chairman of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission



# Window on the struggle

PAUL JOSEPH picks his way through Ahmed Kathrada's prison letters

**M**ORNING Star readers may recall that, in August 1989, gatherings were held in London and a special feature appeared in the Star to celebrate the 60th birthday of leading South African communist and ANC leader Ahmed "Kathy" Kathrada.

On his 70th birthday, Kathrada was in his 10th year of freedom in the new South Africa, having been imprisoned for life under the apartheid regime in the Rivonia trial.

To mark his birthday, Mayibuye Books, together with Michigan State University Press, published a volume of 86 letters from the 900 pieces of correspondence that he wrote during the period of his incarceration.

There have been book launches in South Africa, Canada, the US and, recently, in London.

Kathrada's communications were severely restricted by crude censorship, constant prison snooping and the withholding of letters and books.

But years of imprisonment taught him new techniques of subterfuge, including coded writing.

Not only was he able to write letters but he was also part of a select band of political prisoners to smuggle out documents and directives from the leadership of the struggle in South Africa and in exile.

The 900 pieces of correspondence must make him the most prolific letter writer in South African prison history.

The selection of letters are a sort of travelogue, biographical sketch, political history and guide to food, music and literature.

What comes out through these snippets is his love, respect and regard for his many comrades, friends, relatives and acquaintances.

When the authorities gradually eased their brutal and callous treatment of prisoners, it was as a consequence of the prisoners making a courageous and disciplined stand under the leadership of Nelson Mandela, combined with the growing internal resistance movement and international solidarity.

In reading these letters, one sees the stature of Kathrada as someone who is in



HERO: Ahmed Kathrada carried high on the shoulders of African National Congress supporters after his release from jail.

total command.

But he is also understandably overcome with nostalgia and emotion when receiving news of births, deaths of comrades or their children's marriages.

Kathrada loved parties, food and companionship, so he constantly reflects upon these experiences.

The extent of his correspondence is amazing, as he communicates with people in South Africa, Britain, Europe, United States and Canada.

Of the vast number of people that he writes about, we can pick out the kind of characters and the qualities of the people who, in their modest and quiet way, helped sustain Kathrada and who, in turn, drew confidence from his letters for the future of South Africa.

He writes of them with affection and warmth. Even when writing about apartheid law enforcers, he writes without hatred and rancour.

Perhaps the most important recipient of letters smuggled out through Bram Fischer — when Kathrada was held in 90 days detention — was Sylvia Neame, with whom he held a long, loving relationship — not an easy task given the Immorality Act banning sex between black and white people.

Neame was later jailed for her involvement in the underground Communist Party.

He writes of his concern about some of India's communal problems, which Nehru tried hard to end.

He is astonished at the narrowness of some of the Muslim protagonists in South Africa, who seem more concerned about Muslim problems in other parts of the world than getting involved in fighting the racial issues in South Africa.

Some of the letters tell of the banter, fun and games of fellow prisoners.

Then there is the joy and delight of re-

ceiving food parcels at Eid, Diwali and Christmas.

A lot of this outside organisation came from Zohra, Kathrada's steadfast niece. She became his confidant, eyes, ears and telescope on family and friends. She comes out a gem.

The other quality that emerged from Kathrada's letters is his tolerance of political differences — something which he notably lacked before Rivonia.

In prison, he gets on well with sections of the Fourth International, the PAC, the African Resistance Movement and the adherents of Steve Biko's Black Consciousness Movement.

Many of his old-time ANC and CP friends who swung over to PAC remained his friends.

He writes with affection of two such figures — Barney Desai and George Peake. His letter to Barney's daughter Zivia is one of the many loving letters.

This tolerance paid off as many PAC members and some from the Unity Movement joined the ANC after the collapse of apartheid.

One of the issues that Kathrada raises in a letter to Sylvia Neame is the role of Bob Hepple.

Hepple was arrested in the swoop at Rivonia. He was charged but later released. He was to be a state witness but fled and made his way to England.

Kathrada writes: "Of course, everybody must have been quite shocked that the Mountain View cottage (one of the ANC hideouts) was given away by Bob Hepple.

"I must say, I wasn't. From the first day when we were released from 90 days detention, I suspected him of telling the police more than he admitted.

"In fact, I should say that I started suspecting him even before this, when, during interrogation, I was told that some of my friends were talking. At the time, I thought this was to induce me to talk,

though there were little things here and there which made one suspect.

"What can one do? I suppose these things happen in any struggle. I feel very sorry for his poor wife. She is such a nice girl and must be taking this very badly."

But two documents have since come to light — first, a letter from Joel Joffe, the instructing attorney to the Rivonia trialists, and, second, a handwritten letter (below, left) to Hepple from Walter Sisulu, both of which put the record straight.

Hepple had to live through this image as a "traitor" for over 30 years. Hepple escaped with the apparent knowledge of the Rivonia trialists and with the assistance of Bram Fischer.

Since 1990, Hepple has been to South Africa and Namibia several times, where he has helped draft labour legislation in those countries.

Hepple is also a trustee to the Canon Collins Educational Trust. He was made honorary professor of law at Wits University and a QC in England.

Only two South Africans share that distinction — the other being Nelson Mandela.

The biographical note omits to mention that Kathrada left the Communist Party several years ago and that he turned down a Cabinet position in the 1994 government.

It came as a surprise and disappointment to many of his colleagues that he did not play a part in negotiations for the new government.

Nonetheless, one must accept that Kathrada is a rare political figure who spent over 55 years in the liberation movement and helped to bring an end to the monster of apartheid.

● *Letters from Robben Island — A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence* is published by Mayibuye Books of Cape Town and the Michigan State University and is available from the Africa Book Centre at £16.99.

## Letter from Walter Sisulu

"I HAVE authorised my attorney to reply to you and to give you the full facts of what actually happened. But, at the same time, I felt that I should personally write to you about this matter.

"Even before we received your letter, we had made some efforts to convey to your father the true position, but, owing to our difficulties and pressure of work in the case, it was not possible to do this in time.

"We were not only concerned about the effect that this would have on you, but about your parents as well, who not only are personal friends of some of us, but whom we hold in very high esteem.

"I sincerely very much regret the publicity given to my evidence by the press on this matter and the inconvenience which must have been caused by this affair.

"It certainly did not reflect my views about you. Apart from the facts that the statement was taken out of its context, I was forced to answer a question put to me by a jailer.

"The statement was made under these circum-

stances. On a previous day, I was asked whether I regarded a certain witness as a traitor and others like him and what we would do with such persons.

"My reply was that I did regard him as a traitor and that he would be tried when the time comes.

"The following day, I was asked about you. I said that you were not in the same position with X. The counsel also tried to intervene, but we were referred to the evidence with you, specifically on the supposition of the police statement being correct.

"I said, in that case, even him (meaning you), would be tried like anybody else when the time comes.

"What I wanted to convey was that the information by the police would have to be checked. It was not possible to evade the question. I was unhappy about the whole affair.

"I am not the type of man who would easily fall for the branding of a colleague. I certainly would not just rely on the police statement without checking and satisfying myself about the true facts of the matter."

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