

Let Us Emulate Mahlangu

-Thabo Mziwakhe

The lonely figure of Mrs Martha Mahlangu at the graveside of her slain son, Solomon, is a chilling indictment against the South African racist regime.. It speaks, so eloquently, of the utter callousness, a yawning emptiness of the spirit, treachery and a collective belief that the life of a black is expendable, and is set at nought.

Solomon Mahlangu was hanged in the city of his birth, Pretoria; this is a city which, like a vicious dog, snaps at all black people and bares its fangs. Very few people have made it through the teeth of the South African racist regime, which is what Pretoria, after all, symbolises. His life was so brutally and suddenly snuffed out on the 6th of April, 1979. The choice of the day they executed Solomon is the very height of cynicism. The Dutch brigand, Jan van Riebeeck, the leader of the Dutch East India Company hordes, landed on the shores of South Africa in the Cape on the same day. It was on this day that the racists - violence really being the warp and woof of the racists' heritage - deprived Solomon of his most valued possession, life. To ease suspicions, to appropriate the consciences of the white electorate and to show that everything is all under control; the racists murdered Solomon at the prime of his youth.

TREADMILL

Solomon Mahlangu's youthful days were filled with the kinds of terror and horrors of being on the racial treadmill forever. What this means, then, is that his life was being menaced by the monstrous teeth of the regime the same way millions of the black, beleaguered youth is being threatened. So in a sense he was in the same economic trap that ensnares countless millions of our people. Hence he sought ways and means of supplementing whatever meagre earnings that found themselves in his family's hands. He sold apples in the trains.

Those who've sold anything in a train, be it shoelaces or apples or monkey-nuts, know it is an extremely precarious undertaking. These vendors, called 'smoksers' in the township parlance, have to keep their eyes on the ubiquitous railroad policeman, the township bullies who'd rob him of his wares and the customer. Moreover this terrible drama is enacted in a coach in a train, the actors encapsulated by time and space. These young boys, then are agile, and the nature of their job gets them to know South African society at its basest.

It is not surprising, then, that Solomon was involved in June 16, 1976; his eyes beheld the unprecedented terror unleashed on young men and women of his age - and his colour. He must have been struck by the futility of people, unarmed, face to face, with the vengeful enemy armed with NATO-supplied weapons of destruction.

Solomon, then, hearkening to the cry of his people in the times of anguish, joined the ANC and became a soldier of our people's army, *Umkhonto We Sizwe*.

On an MK mission in Johannesburg Solomon Mahlangu, Monty Motlounge and George Mazibuko had an altercation with some white people in a Goch Street warehouse. What happened was Monty was captured and Solomon had all the chances of beating a hasty retreat. Instead he selflessly went to the aid of his comrade in which brief encounter, in which two whites were shot to death, he was captured. This was on 13 June 1977, three days before the first anniversary of the massacres of June 16, 1976.

A lengthy and agonising trial followed. Monty Motlounge could not stand trial, it was reported, because he had lost his mind. This in itself makes us want to ask what kind of system can render a person a raving lunatic after a short stay in the police dungeons? But, then, those who've been through the mill, who've gone through the hands of the grand inquisitors of John Vorster Square will simply shake their heads, remembering the hands of legalized murderers.

In the trial Solomon was convicted of murder and sentenced to death. In the kangaroo court Solomon couldn't have had a fair trial.

Then began a Save Mahlangu Campaign where the UN, OAU, to name a few world bodies - were calling for the stay of execution of the young comrade. Even the wife of one of the men who died at Goch Street, after it had been proved that Solomon hadn't even pulled the trigger that killed the man, asked that the young hero be spared.

Despite the whole condemnation of peace-loving mankind, despite speeches and lofty editorials, Solomon Mahlangu was hanged in Pretoria on 6 April 1979, in the Year of the Spear.

PEOPLE'S HERO

Why, then, does Solomon Mahlangu occupy such a significant spot in our hearts? Why is he a people's hero? In the first place Solomon Mahlangu's deeds transformed the nature of South Africa. South Africa, after him, will never be the same again. He imbued the youth - the current actors in the revolution - with the spirit of no surrender. His selfless example in the face of the enemy puts him in the ranks of men and women who were cast in the mould of bravery. He was a true revolutionary.

People, sometimes well-meaning folk, sometimes use the word 'revolutionary' loosely, confusing it with 'freedom fighter'. A revolutionary is a person who's resolved night and day - come what may! - to do deeds aimed at freeing his captive people. He can do this against great odds and imponderables with little regard for personal safety. One somehow gets a glimpse of what a revolutionary is when Ho Chi Minh declares "All my life I have served the fatherland, the revolution and the people with all my heart and strength. If I should now depart from this world, I would have nothing to regret, except not being able to serve longer anymore".

A freedom fighter, on the other hand - and this has been said repeatedly - is a person of good intentions. He'll struggle along but somewhere along the line, when the goal proves to be farther than he thought, he's likely to get tired.

OLDEN DAYS

In the olden days when warriors with spears faced the British marauders in the Wars of Resistance, a shot would ring out and a warrior would lie dead in his own blood. The other warriors would jump up, saying, "*Uyadela Wena Osulapho* - You have finally achieved, you who have fallen!" Invigorated and inspired and unafraid, they would head straight for the hated enemy. This was not being suicidal or harbouring of a subconscious death wish, but these warriors knew that the final destiny of man is death - and they were going to take as many of the enemy with them.

The picking of the fallen hero's weapon has been almost automatic. South Africa shuddered as never before when MK unleashed its firepower, even before the hangman had gone to



wash his hands. When .66m rands went up in smoke in SASOL, it was Solomon Mahlangu the comrades had in their minds. The racists had, to use a popular phrase, stepped on a venomous snake's tail. After every attack the racists get more and more irrational.

There are more police stations sandbagged and black policemen hide their uniforms in paper bags on or from work. And people look at all this with contempt, seeing the minions

of the law cringing - all this is a continuation of the task Solomon Mahlangu didn't finish.

The Botha/Malan clique will change, are changing. What will never change is the people's resolve to freedom. The racists desecrated Mahlangu's grave; but this did not deter Mrs Martha Mahlangu. She has grown stronger, perhaps remembering the last words of her son who exhorted her not to cry, but to worry about those who are suffering. He said, "I have done my bit of contribution and may God spare you". His mother, who won the title of South Africa's Woman of the Year for 1979, must have been very proud of him when she heeded his last words in the fascist gallows: "My blood will nourish the tree which will bear the fruits of freedom. Tell my people that I love them and that they must continue the struggle. Aluta continua!"

The youth of our country have heeded your call, Comrade Solly, and the struggle really continues.

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