

ELLIOT MNGADI: A TRIBUTE

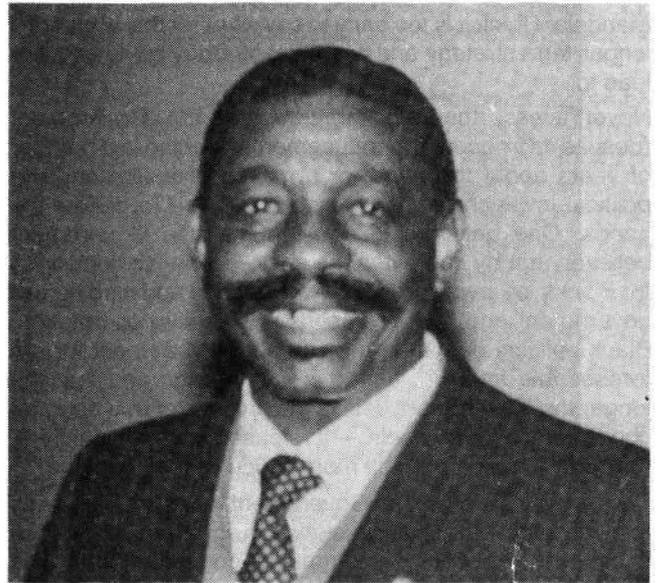
On November 20th, 1988, Elliot Mngadi died at his home in the resettlement town of Ezakheni, a very different place from the Roosboom in which he had been born 70 years before.

Roosboom was a black freehold area which straddled the main Durban-Johannesburg road about 7 miles south of Ladysmith. In the early years of the century, before the Natives' Land Act made it impossible, it was quite common for a group of black people to come together in a syndicate to pool their resources to buy a farm. Elliot's father was one of such a group which bought Roosboom, which was then surveyed and sub-divided, each member of the syndicate getting a plot on which to build his home and have his garden, while all had access to the commonage to graze their stock.

Elliot grew up in the comparatively unrestricted atmosphere of this rural community, walking to school at St Hilda's College each day, where the rule of the rather daunting English ladies who ran it was that only English should be spoken on the premises. His weekends he spent caddying and doing other odd jobs in Ladysmith. When his father fell ill he had to give up school. He went to Johannesburg to find work, first as a domestic worker, later as an assistant in a store in the city. No doubt the English he had learnt at St Hilda's was a great help in finding a job and he seems to have been lucky in his employers, who kept strict standards, but went out of their way to help him further his education, which he did through night school and later through correspondence courses. His foreman in the store in which he worked was tyrannical only in his insistence on the proper use of English. Elliot used to relate with a chuckle how they were working together in the basement one day when suddenly the foreman dropped everything and ran up the stairs and out into the street shouting "Policeman! Policeman!". Elliot ran out onto the pavement after him calling anxiously "What's the matter? Why do you want a policeman?". The foreman, who by this time had stopped calling for the policeman, answered fiercely, "To arrest you." Elliot, now thoroughly alarmed, asked "But what for?". "For murdering the King's English," came the stern reply.

By the time the war was over Elliot had had enough of Johannesburg and being separated from his family and he returned to Roosboom to manage a local co-operative. When the co-operative closed down he took on the job of Messenger-of-the-Court, and it was at this point that he came into my life.

The Liberal Party had barely been launched, in mid-1953, when a letter arrived from some people called Hain in Ladysmith, inviting the Party to hold a house-meeting at their home there. "Some people called Hain in Ladysmith" turned out to be Ad and Walter Hain, who soon after moved to Pretoria, there to become involved in one of the Party's most vigorous branches. For that, they were both later to be banned and, when nobody in Pretoria would employ Walter any longer, forced into exile. There they took with them their young family, the eldest of whom was Peter. However, that is another story.



The Liberal Party sent Selby Msimang and myself to that meeting. There were about a dozen people at it, if I remember rightly. Amongst them was this stocky figure with the bristling moustache immaculately turned out in riding breeches and glistening leather leggings. This was Elliot Mngadi, dressed in the outfit he had decided represented the right mixture of dash and authority for a Messenger-of-the-Court going about his duties on a motor-bike.

He listened with great attention to everything that was said that night, asked a great many questions, and then joined the Party. Later he was to tell me that at that moment in his life he was close to becoming a black racist. Instead he became a tough, convinced and highly effective non-racialist.

I soon found that Elliot did nothing by halves. Having decided to become a Liberal he set about persuading friends and relations that they should too. He was so successful at it that when it could finally afford it the Liberal Party in Natal asked him to become its first organiser. He soon set up a network of Branches covering most of the small towns and black areas of Northern Natal. Most of the people he recruited were Africans but certainly not all. He even found a scattering of white recruits from that most reactionary part of the Province.

RESETTLEMENT

During the 1950s the Nationalist Government started planning in earnest to resettle the many black freehold communities in Natal, like Roosboom, which were offensive to its apartheid plans. Being located in what it regarded as "white" South Africa, it had decided that they would have to go. To meet this threat a joint initiative was launched by the ANC and the Liberal Party to help the communities organise against it. Elliot was chosen to canvass these so-called **blackspots** to try to bring them together to fight the Government's plans. As a result the Northern Natal African Landowners' Association was established and affiliated to it were most of the blackspots.

Although it called itself a landowners' association tenants were welcomed as members. It elected Elliot as its organising secretary. This was a high profile position and one not calculated to endear him to the powers-that-be. Not surprising then that he was one of the group of Northern Natal Congressites and Liberals detained in the Pietermaritzburg gaol in 1960. He emerged from that experience unrepentant and went straight back to his work with the Landowners' Association and the Liberal Party. He organised a mass prayer meeting at Roosboom to protest against resettlement. It was attended by over 1 000 delegates from threatend areas and went on for two days. When the National Treasurer of the Liberal Party, E. V. Mahomed, was banned, he took over that post. All this was too much for the Security Police who reacted in the only way they knew and banned him. By the time that ban was over, in the later 1960s, several blackspots had already been removed and Roosboom was high on the list of those to follow. During 1975 and 1976 it was systematically destroyed, its buildings levelled and its people transported to the resettlement area of Ezakheni. That story is told in a paper delivered by Elliot some years later and which we republish as a further tribute to him in this issue. It tells of the terrible conditions they found at Ezakheni but not of how he responded to them.

Elliot always insisted that the only Parliament he was interested in sitting in was the House of Assembly in Cape Town. He was totally opposed to the homeland system but now he found himself willy-nilly part of a homeland and his Roosboom people in a desperate situation. He set out to do what he could for them. If that meant getting involved in local government structures, so be it. Soon he found himself to all intents and purposes the "mayor" of

Ezakheni, a position he held at the time of his death. He also held it in 1979 when an attempt was made to put up the bus fares between Ladysmith and Ezakheni. The community was outraged and decided to boycott the buses, a decision which Elliot supported. He came to play a leading role in what turned out to be a highly successful campaign. Unlike most people, black or white, who hold high office in South Africa, and seem to think that it is for ordinary people to do what they tell them to do, Elliot felt that people holding office were there to be told by ordinary people what they wanted them to do. Each weekend, during the entire boycott, a community meeting was held to report on the previous week's events and to decide on further action. The boycott lasted nearly two months. When it ended fares had reverted to what they had been before it started, not a single violent incident had been reported, and every resident, every week, had had the chance to have their say on how they felt the campaign was being conducted.

Ezakheni remains a grim place but it is a good deal less grim than it was ten years ago, and for that it owes much to the efforts and energy of this one man. His memorial service drew tributes from an extraordinarily diverse selection of people. Who else could bring to the same platform a Kwa-Zulu Minister, a member of the South African Council of Churches, a Magistrate and a former ANC detainee? Their tributes were eloquent and moving but most eloquent and moving was the presence and the singing of the hundreds of ordinary people whose life at Ezakheni he had striven to make just that much more tolerable.

He would have been a good man to have in that House of Assembly. □

by Elliot Mngadi

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THE REMOVAL OF ROOSBOOM

A talk given at a meeting of the Association for Rural Advancement, in Ladysmith, on 30-5-81.

I will start with a short history of how "black spot" removals came about. Before 1913 Africans could buy land almost anywhere in South Africa and were allowed to do so by law. But in 1913 the government of that day legislated a law known as the *Natives Land Act*. That Natives Land Act restricted blacks from buying land in South Africa unless we got the consent of the Governor-General — we did not have the State President then. After that an African could only get land from a white person with permission. One of the reasons whites had for selling their land was that it was unproductive and seeing the blacks had nowhere else to buy land, they of course would buy that land.

Then, in 1936, the law was amended and given a new name it became the *Native Trust and Land Act* of 1936. One of the things that law did was to give power to the authorities — the Governor-General with the Committee working with him — to declare certain black areas in Natal, certain farms, "black spots". They would say: "Alright, Matiwane's Kop, since it is surrounded by white farms — black spot." They wanted those areas to become all-white

and so they planned to remove these farms. That's how then "black spots" came into being. It was before they legislated the *Group Areas Act* which I will leave to the town people to discuss, since it affects them. What I am talking about are the laws affecting rural people. As a result of this 1936 law, in the whole of Natal 242 farms owned by blacks became "black spots".

NORTHERN NATAL AFRICAN LAND-OWNERS ASSOCIATION

After the 1939 war, in about 1956, the government first started moving people from these "black spots". One of the farms they started with was Besters. At that time I was an organiser of the Liberal Party and I was also one of the landowners at Roosboom, near Ladysmith. It was during this time, as part of my work, that I had to organise the African landowners in Natal to form a body of their own. In 1955/56 we formed a body called Northern Natal African Landowners Association. I don't know whether fortunately or unfortunately, but I was elected Secretary of that body.