

Apartheid: Twenty Years On

8 May 2014

Robben Island, South Africa, in March 2014. It's a poignant moment: Ahmed Kathrada is accompanying us on the ferry over to the prison island that lies off the coast of Cape Town in the South Atlantic Ocean. Together with his two former fellow prisoners Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, 84 year old Kathrada was one of the most renowned leaders of the African National Congress (ANC). He brings us around the large prison yard, the setting for the famous photo showing anti-apartheid prisoners sitting on the ground breaking stones. We visit the quarry where they were forced to work under perilous conditions. I'm filled with admiration for the calm, the composure, and the relentless fighting spirit that Kathrada and his fellow campaigners displayed from the start of their struggle in the early 1960's right through their Long Walk to Freedom.

Their story took shape in a place called Rivonia, a suburb of Johannesburg and my next destination. At the center of events was Liliesleaf Farm, a place used as a secret base by white communists linked with Arthur Goldreich to organize the ANC's armed fight against apartheid. A raid in July 1963 led to the arrest of almost all of the group's leaders. A few months later the Rivonia Trial began: a series of political proceedings ending, in June 1964, with life sentences for Kathrada, Sisulu and Mandela.

On our half hour journey from the center of Johannesburg to the farm, it is painful to see the hundreds of fences, walls, barbed wire barriers, guards, surveillance systems and advertisements for security firms. It's no different in Cape Town, a place of countless visible and invisible walls: on one side the townships stretching along the way between the airport and the waterfront; on the other the gentrified harbor district, where predominantly white consumers are waited on by mostly black staff. I'm at an international conference with human rights lawyers from around the world. My South African friends fill me in on some of the other problems facing the country. Young lawyer Dmitri Holtzman and his organization Equal Education work to protect the human right to education – no easy task given the privatized education system in South Africa. Charles Abrahams and his law firm take cases against multinational corporations who produce goods under dangerous and inhumane conditions.

Then there's the ongoing mystery surrounding the Marikana massacre. On 16 August 2012 police shot dead 34 striking workers at a platinum mine. The workers had been seeking a rise in the minimum wage. The work of the state commission of inquiry has been plagued by delays. The commission has still not managed to identify the main police officers or the gunmen involved and has failed to shed any light on the role of the mining company Lonmin in the massacre.

Ahmed Kathrada and his generation were successful in their struggle to bring freedom to South Africa; that is their legacy. It now falls on the next generations and new political movements to fight to ensure that the social and economic rights set out in the Freedom Charter and in South Africa's constitution become a reality.

There's a lot to be done in South Africa. And this time it would be nice if Western governments and corporations were on the side of the South African majority.