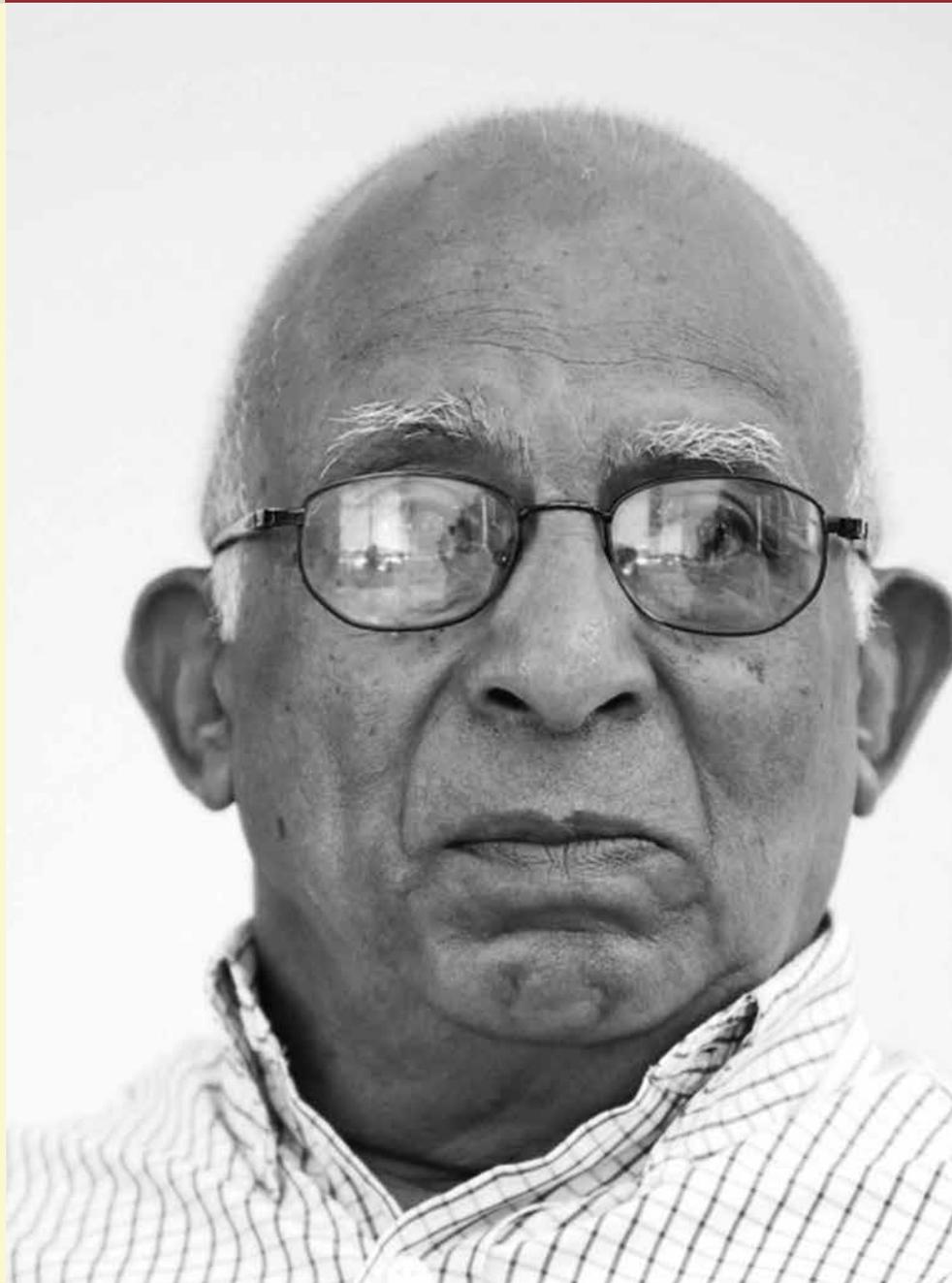


SHIRISH NANABHAI

A HUMBLE FREEDOM FIGHTER

LIVES OF A COURAGE PROJECT





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SHIRISH NANABHAI



Shirish was born one of eight siblings on 1 March 1938 at 51 Commercial Rd, Fordsburg. Jasmath Nanabhai, Shirish J. Nanabhai's father, was from the village of Karadi/Matvad in Gujarat, India. Jasmath immigrated to South Africa after the turn of the last century.

In a way, it was inevitable that Shirish would get involved in politics because Jasmath was active during his youth in the Indian National Congress, which had fought against British rule in India. Jasmath inculcated the spirit of revolution in his children:

"I remember my father telling me how they would use empty coconut shells to create petrol bombs. Not only did the shells make excellent receptacles, they were easily camouflaged because coconuts are widely used by Hindus for religious rituals."

Upon arrival in South Africa, Jasmath settled in Boksburg and was employed as a "duster boy" by a silk merchant on the East Rand. While his duties at this establishment were merely to ensure that the silk was kept clean and dusted, his business acumen led him to learn the trade and become a buyer for the company. This eventually led to a trip to Japan and, over time, he learnt bookkeeping at the same company.

By the time Shirish was born, the family had moved to a flat in Fordsburg near to the famous "Red Square"—the site on which the Oriental Plaza was later built. This was an open space that served as a venue for public meetings and an important rallying point for the movement.

The Red Square was also the site of Shirish's first arrest in 1955 at the age of 17. He was arrested by the police for chalking a political symbol on a wall in the square. "I was kept for two hours, given a smack and told to go home," he said.

While a lenient punishment, this first experience of the state's response to dissent would make real his father's refrain that political activism, however noble and just, carried with it real consequences that one should be prepared to bear.

Shirish joined the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress when he was a teenager in the mid-1950s. He remembers a social trip to Cape Town organised by the TIYC in 1955 with Moosa "Mosie" Moolla, Suliman "Solly" Essakjee, Farid Adams, Indres Naidoo, and Peter Joseph. He also remembered with great fondness serving soup with his comrades to delegates to the Congress of the People in 1955. He was elected to the executive of the TIYC in 1956.



In 1957, he spent a year in London, England studying at the College of Aeronautical Engineering and returned a year later. He then immersed himself in political work, distributing leaflets and putting up posters for political campaigns.

When the State of Emergency was declared in 1960 and many comrades were detained, Shirish remembered the invaluable role that the local community played. He was responsible for collecting food from Mrs Bhayat and Mrs Pahad and delivering it to the detainees.

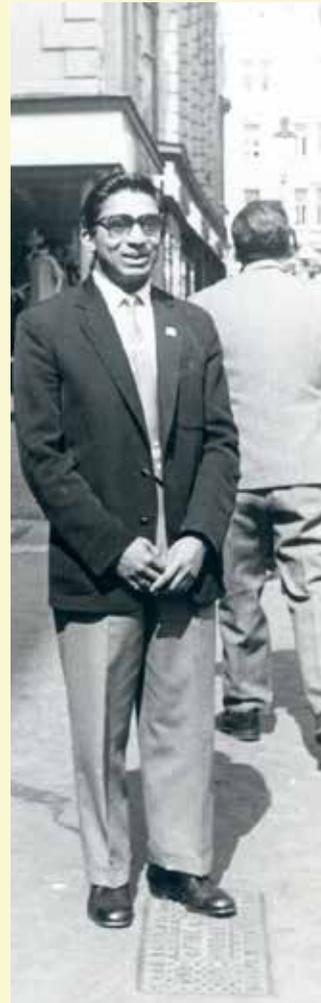
His task was to be short lived as he was also detained a month after the emergency was declared. He comforted himself with

the thought that many old friends and comrades who were detained would also be at the prison, but when he got to the Fort, he quickly learnt that the detainees had been transferred to Pretoria. He would spend several months in isolation, confined to a cell where the screams of prisoners being whipped were his only companionship.

During this time, black warders would sometimes slip him a daily newspaper or medical officers would insist that the prison authorities allow him time in the prison courtyard.

Shirish remembered driving Joe Matthews – a leading member of the ANC and SACP at the time – with Suliman "Babla" Saloojee to the Bechuanaland border to help get Joe out of the country in the early 1960s.

Reggie Vandeyar approached Shirish in December 1962 to become a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). He received basic training in explosives and was instructed to scout for potential targets. During this same period, he held a job as a clerk at S Malk, a clothing and general merchandise store in Johannesburg. During lunchtimes, he would engage in political activity or meet on street corners to plan operations with members of his unit.





"One afternoon, I returned to the shop after a protest was held on the City Hall steps. During a confrontation, I managed to get a blue eye. When I returned to work, the owner of the company noticed it and brought me a piece of steak to reduce the swelling."

Just five months after he joined MK, he was arrested with his unit leader Reggie Vandeyar and comrade Indres Naidoo. They were caught in the act of planting and detonating explosives at a railway signal box in Riverlea – the fourth in a string of targets. The fourth member of their unit, who had supplied explosives and arms, Gammat Jardine, was a police informer and had betrayed them.

They appeared in court within forty-eight hours and were advised to plead guilty by their legal representative, Dr George Lowen QC. They were each sentenced to ten years in prison. These were the first three members of Indian origin to be arrested for MK activities in the Transvaal.

They were first moved to Leeuwkop Prison on the outskirts of Johannesburg. On arrival, a wing of the prison had been emptied and dedicated to this small group of "dangerous terrorists". He would later comment with



amusement on a massive show of force that the worried prison authorities used to cow the three young men on arrival and the surprise expressed when the “terrorists” turned out to be so human and ordinary. Leeuwkop he remembered most for its cold and cruel conditions. Prisoners were never allowed to wear shoes, even when working in the quarry and were made to run around a courtyard to dry off after brief, cold showers. Here they would later meet up with Joe Gqabi and other political prisoners, which gave them a sense of solidarity and comradeship.

In December 1963, Shirish and seventy other prisoners were transferred by truck to Robben Island. This 1600km drive crammed in the back of a truck was a famously extreme experience but Shirish, with his ever twinkling eye, would speak of the experience of overnighting at the police station in the small town of Richmond. Here, the local police had rushed to accommodate the large numbers of prisoners in their tiny jail, having local people bake fresh bread for them and fashioning extra coffee mugs out of oil cans from a nearby garage.

At Robben Island, the prisoners were housed in communal cells, essentially a hall with blankets and reed mats on the floor. Here they would share cold showers, a single toilet and zero privacy. Being amongst the first political prisoners associated with the Congress movement on the Island, they arrived to find the space dominated by the PAC’s Poqo combatants. They would spend a great deal of time and effort in the early days of confinement negotiating the relationship between these two traditions.

The pointless and brutal manual labour from Leeuwkop intensified here. The warder’s had a slogan they would recite to prisoners working in the limestone quarry: “Klap die groot klip kleiner en die klein klip feiner” (Knock the big stone smaller and the small stone finer).



Due to the large numbers of common law prisoners, Robben Island also had its share of the “Numbers” gangs. Shirish quickly learnt that gangsters were calling the shots in the prison and the warders used these gangs to attack and beat up political prisoners. Slowly, political prisoners, who were in the minority at the time, were able to politicise them and eventually gained their respect. Shirish remembers when one prisoner, known as Whitey, had just been released from solitary confinement, where he was locked up next to Nelson Mandela. He returned to the communal cells proudly proclaiming, “I’m Mandela’s

man!” In time, the authorities became aware of the effect that this interaction had on the common law criminals and segregated them into two categories, disallowing interaction. Eventually, the common law prisoners were transferred out and the Island was used exclusively to incarcerate political prisoners.

Life on the Island was occupied by efforts to subvert the status quo, not least to gather information. Trips to the quarry were opportunities to try to steal away for a short time to send messages and collect or distribute goods. They spent much of their time thinking up extremely creative ways to communicate with the outside world too. Similarly, the political prisoners were able to use the common law prisoners, who had greater freedom of the Island, to smuggle goods and news into and around the prison. Efforts were even made to plan an escape and a trench was dug for the purposes (though it was abandoned due to the difficulties posed by the ocean itself).

After a long struggle with the authorities, they started sports clubs in the prison. This was something that was particularly important to Shirish’s memories of the place and he served on the prisoners’ football committee from then on. They cleared and prepared an area for a football pitch and tricked the authorities into providing many of

the resources needed for the work.

On the Island, inmates made creative use of all and any resources they were able to access. James Chirwa, a comrade from Malawi, made soccer nets from discarded nylon found on the seashore. One of Shirish's most treasured possessions is a belt made from the same material that comrade Lambert Mbatha had made for him. He was able to smuggle this item off the Island on his release, a contravention of the rule that all personal belongings became state property. Inmates would also make musical instruments out of kelp and Shirish, in particular, would sew pockets onto prison trousers using old cut-up khaki shirts.

Shirish was eventually released in 1973. He was immediately banned and put under house arrest in Fordsburg, compelled to report once a week at the Fordsburg Police Station. He took every opportunity to flout this banning order with great pride, getting local children to warn him when the police were coming to check on him. He would even arrange to meet with comrades under the auspices of visiting a particular Hindu temple and then simply sneaking out. It was during this period that he met and began courting his Rajula, a childhood friend, for whom he would also gladly break his house arrest conditions. They married in 1978 and moved to Lenasia.

After the expiry of his first banning order and house arrest, he was banned for a further two years without house arrest. During this time, he was expected to report regularly to the John Vorster Square police station in the centre of town, near to his place of work.

At the end of 1979, activists Tim Jenkins, Steven Lee and Alex Moumbaris escaped from Pretoria Central Prison in a famous and daring operation. Immediately on release they went their separate ways and Shirish was soon called upon to provide a hiding place for Lee, while arrangements were made to get him out of the country. He stashed him in an unused upstairs room of the shop where he had worked, overlooked, just a few hundred meters away, by John Vorster Square and the security police – Lee escaped the country days later.

A few weeks later, as Shirish would tell the story, he had one of his regularly scheduled check-ins at that same police station, but at this point, he had put the escape out of his mind and "forgotten about it". While sitting at the table of a senior officer, another walked in to talk about the investigation of the escape – the sudden shock at being reminded how close he was to that event must have shown on his face, he would say, because the policeman immediately stood up and grabbed him – putting him into detention the same day, before arresting



Indres' younger brother Prema.

He was brutally beaten and tortured with electric shocks during this period of detention but had the presence of mind and consciousness to carefully hide the burn marks from his police guards. They allowed him access to the police doctor once his bruises had healed, thinking there was no evidence of his torture. He immediately showed the doctor, and subsequently his lawyers, the marks and they in turn used this to have part of the charges against him dropped. This left him with a shortened sentence of one year for his second stint in prison.

Rajula was not political, but became active in the Detainees Parents Support Committee during this period. In recognition of his sacrifices and his immense

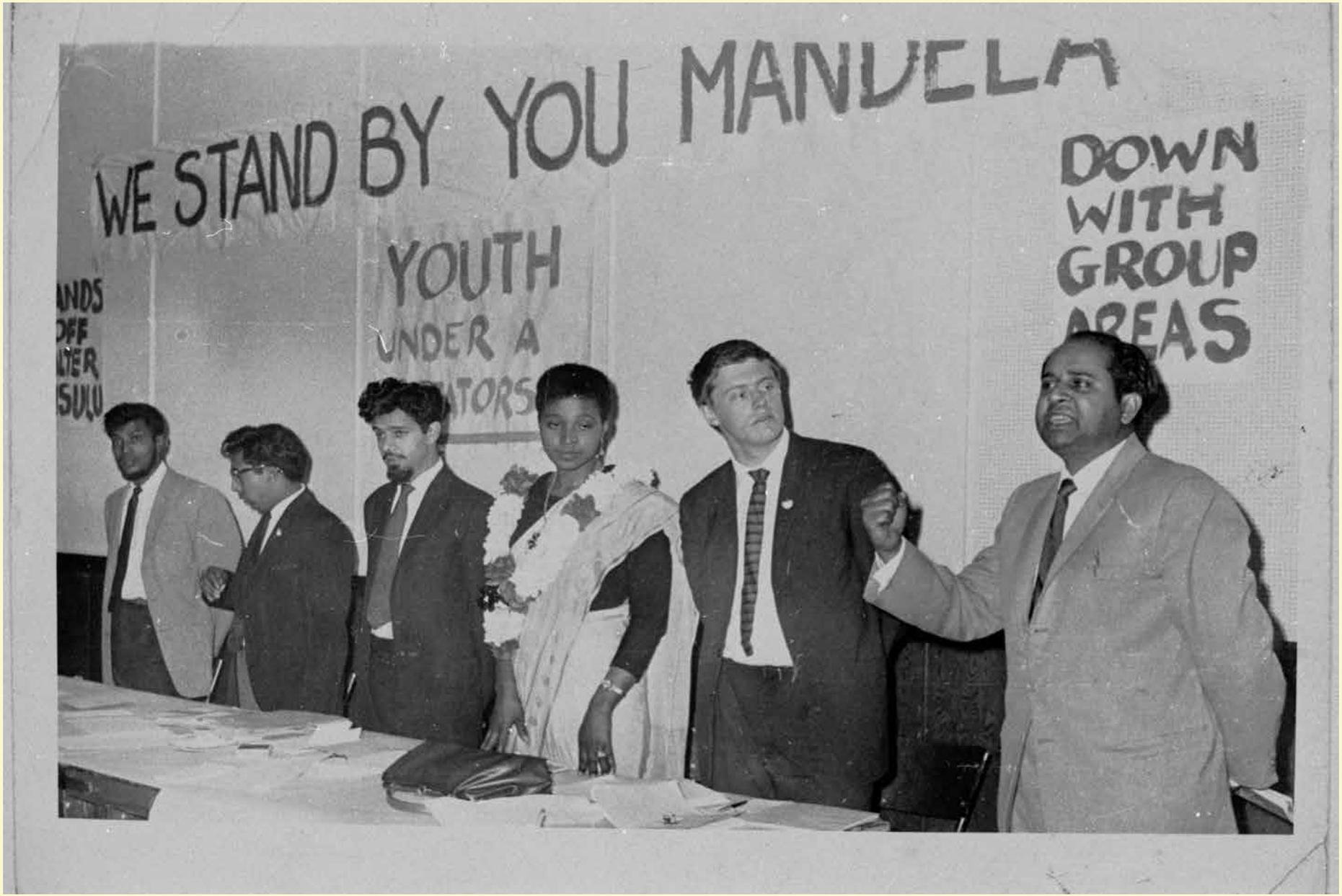


contribution to the creation of a democratic South Africa,

Shirish was awarded the National Order of Mendi in Silver for Bravery 2014.

Shirish and Rajula's child – their son Kamal – was born in 1980. Rajula tragically passed away in a motorcar accident in 1985. Shirish and Kamal lived together in Lenasia since then.

In recent years, the sight of Shirish walking around the area with his shopping bags, visiting friends and comrades, was a common one.



TRIBUTES FROM AKF YOUNG LEADERS

In Memory of the Remarkable Shirish Nanabhai

By: Vuyelwa Mantje

I met Uncle Shirish when I was an intern at the foundation in 2014. Before I had my first conversation with him, he was the sweet grandpa who liked hanging out at the office. I thought that he just enjoyed reminiscing about the days of the struggle with Uncle Isu and bringing sweets to the youth department which he often referred to as the naughty corner, but I didn't know much about his involvement in MK and the liberation struggle. One day he came to the office with a bag full of medals, awards and some old newspaper cutting and documents. I was

in awe of all this historical material, but more in awe of how I never heard about him in my history books from school. He told me about when he was first arrested at 17 years old for drawing a political symbol on a wall and when he was detained in the first state of emergency in the 1960s and when he was sentenced to ten years imprisonment on Robben Island. When I'd rave about how much I needed coffee, he'd smile warmly and tell me that coffee on Robben island was burnt, grinded corn and chicory, with no sugar... "it tasted terrible", he would often say. From the short conversations I'd have with him I came to realise how some parts had been lost because many MK veterans, including Uncle Shirish were unbeknown to a lot of young people.

In November 2015, we went to a camp on Robben Island with him. He had a small suitcase for the week. He was



very excited to be going back to the island, but more importantly, the piece of history he was going to share with us, young people. We spent a whole week with him telling us stories about events that had happened when he was detained on Robben Island, never forgetting to tell us about the terrible porridge they used to be served for breakfast. In all of his stories, more often than not, he would remind us that the country we had today was fought for with blood, sweat and tears. He would always encourage us to stand up for what was right and rebel against any threat to our freedom. He always reminded us that young people had the uttermost power to bring positive change to society. "It was never easy. It was harsh and hostile, but we had we persevere for the freedom of the people" he would say. These are words that will always ring in my head when I think of him.

I will remember Uncle Shirish as a symbol of perseverance, humility and humbleness in the face of injustices. I will remember him as my favourite history book of untold stories of the South African Liberation Movement.

May his soul rest in peace, his words be remembered and his contribution to our freedom be remembered through future generation.

May his name be remembered in the history books of our history.

Hamba Kahle Mkhonto!





A Monumental Life and Heartwarming Legacy:

By: Shakira Choonara

The last few days of March 2016 could be described as historic days where South Africa's (SA) democracy emerged as triumphant over the country's difficulties. It is this very democracy which leaders such as Shirish Nanabhai contributed to. Uncle Shirish sacrificed his life for the SA we have today, by courageously joining the African National Congress (ANC) armed wing Umkhonto we Sizwe in the 1950 and spent close to 10 years on Robben Island. Moreover, in 2014 he was also a recipient of National Orders for his bravery during SA's apartheid years. However, I believe that Uncle Shirish will always be known for his present role in mentoring, teaching and imprinting on the hearts of many young South Africans.

The first time I met the remarkable Shirish Nanabhai, was at an Ahmed Kathrada Foundation (AKF) leadership camp on Robben Island, in 2015. I recall him having a cigarette clad in a simple tracksuit pants, yellow T-shirt and a red cap, at the time I must admit as many other SA I was unaware of who Uncle Shirish was, although he is

quite approachable, I jokingly scolded him for smoking, he giggled and rolled his eyes at me. In fact every time I saw him after that, he took out a cigarette on purpose and smoked it in front of me. That's when I giggled and rolled my eyes and that's exactly the sort of person and leader that Uncle Shirish was- I'd describe him as being defiant, stood up for what is right and always able to add humour to even the most serious of situations/circumstances. That very day that I read up about Uncle Shirish, and I had the opportunity to interact with him on a few occasions thereafter. It is quite rare to have a few encounters with an individual and be truly inspired, although Uncle Shirish is one such individual. As a young person the conversations I had with him were probably the most fascinating I have ever had with any leader of our times. I feel honoured to have met and interacted with such a leader on Robben Island, where he gave us first-hand accounts of what prison life entailed, and there is much to be said about his humility and simplicity, he joined the youth on the 24 hour bus ride with you to Cape Town and described it as, "being nice and relaxing". The finest memory I have of Uncle Shirish is that during the prison tour he took out a blue plastic packet (like as if he'd been carrying chocolates or something invaluable), instead he took out items he had from his prison years which he smuggled off the Island upon release and kept

all this time without handing it over to a museum, and continued to keep these items in a packet, pulled out one of the spoons he explained he used in prison, and a letter President Jacob Zuma wrote to him as goalkeeper of their team upon being responsible for losing a soccer match.

Uncle Shirish had a way of telling stories and interacting with the youth, I recall a debate on the eve of Madiba's death, where he was asked how he had adapted to life after so many years in prison to which he responded, "there are no problems in life, when I was in prison I had to adapt to prison conditions and out of prison I had to adapt to life" which of course resulted in laughter. The reality of his sacrifices set in when he showed us the prison he slept in, explained the dehumanising prison conditions, the suffering endured, the horrible food and how even they had only one pair of prison clothing which was made so thick that when it was washed it took several days to dry if one washed it.

Hearing of his passing this morning, I have no doubt that every person who knows uncle Shirish or who knows of him was deeply saddened by this news.

"I will remember Uncle Shirish as a symbol of perseverance, humility and humbleness in the face of

injustices. I will remember him as my favourite history book of untold stories of the South African Liberation Movement" - Vuyelwa Mantje Chairperson AKF University of the Witwatersrand

"I first met Uncle Shirish on Robben Island. It was a real privilege to be in the presence of such a humble man I am saddened by the passing of such a humorous and wonderful leader"-Leslie Reddy Vice-Chairperson AKF University of the Witwatersrand.

"He was our personal grandfather figure at the camp with his cute stories. I love how he saw a silver lining in his struggle for freedom, a man full of life"-Lebohang Mkhabela Marketing Officer AKF University of the Witwatersrand

Even though I knew uncle Shirish for a short period of time, I was truly inspired by him, his demeanour, the way he interacted with others, he's humility and I wish that we had more time with this remarkable leader and father to many, including myself. We as young people will never forget the lessons he has taught us, and the mentorship is provided and we aspire to one day be the sort of leader that he was.

The Importance of Memories:

By: Karishma Magan

My first impression of uncle Shirish was, how he had fitted a weeks worth of clothing and toiletries in a 1x2m old leather suitcase and we had packed huge traveling bags to go on our adventure to Robben island. But that was uncle Shirish reflecting the simplicity of life or maybe he was conditioned to taking minimal things to Robben Island.

I have to highlight the importance of packets in uncle Shirish's life. During our tour of his prison cell he took out a blue, plastic packet. And we all wondered about its mysterious contents. He pulled out memories and things he had smuggled out of prison. One of his collectables was a belt woven by a fellow Robben Island prisoner, comrade Lambert Mbatha, just for him. You could see the appreciation and love for his hand-woven belt through the excitement in his voice and facial expressions. He showed us pictures and letters and we stood in awe at how he still preserved all these important memories. My second encounter with uncle Shirish and a plastic packet was at the "symposium on Palestinian political prisoners" where he had collected a bunch of posters and pamphlets about the Palestinian struggle, put them in a plastic packet and tied it to his belt loop in order to

not leave it behind. We all had a good laugh at how the plastic packet bounced around while he walked up and down. This taught me the importance of memories. Uncle Shirish, through his preservation and collection of memories in plastic packets, showed me how important it is to hold memories in order to give meaning to our existence. He spoke about how lonely old age was, but I knew that the memories he kept with him made him feel less alone.

Uncle Shirish had such a zest for life. While we were carrying equipment from the Palestinian event, he decided to carry a heavy speaker. And through many attempts to take it from him, he finally told us "I like to carry heavy stuff and help out because it keeps me young." Uncle Shirish told us how he still cooks and cleans and does everything by himself and for himself. His independence was inspiring. He wasn't going to let old age dominate him, and be bitter about it. No. He was going to carry heavy things, go to every event he was invited to, cook, clean etc. Because that's what life is about- it's about carrying on. He showed me the importance of staying completely you.

Uncle Shirish told us about his apartheid and prison experiences so vividly that you could imagine everything he was saying, almost like a movie. He was convicted under the Sabotage Act in 1963 and sentenced to 10 years of imprisonment for trying to bomb the signal re-

lay-box at Riverlea station, thereby making him one of the first MK recruits to serve on Robben Island. I could tell that his avid love for wearing shorts came from the hatred of being forced to wear “long pants” during his imprisonment. He told us how he had missed tea and biscuits because all they got was a variation of coffee, that being, burnt mielies crushed with chicory. He told us how he was under house arrest (after his 10 years of imprisonment) and managed to escape to attempt to make it to the movies but snuck back just in time to be caught by the police to whom he had lied to and said he had to go and get food. He told us about a gangster imprisoned on Robben Island who kept cents in his neck to buy goods, after which we all stared at uncle Shirish in disgust and amazement. His humorous stories made us all laugh and you could see the joy in his eyes every time we laughed with him.

I could see uncle Shirish’s disappointment in the current political situation and his will to inspire us to stand up against it. He told us about a letter that Zuma wrote to



their soccer team apologizing for not stopping the goal that led to them losing the match and made a comment about how Zuma should be that accountable for his current actions.

I’d like to share a funny moment that happened with uncle Shirish. He walked up to my sister and I and said “Hi girls. I would like to invite you to Sunday lunch.” To which we responded, “sure uncle Shirish, what’s for lunch?” He sneakily answered, “the leftover Briyani I just took from the event”, and we all laughed at the prospect of eating his stolen, leftover Briyani for Sunday lunch.

Uncle Shirish and I became friends. An old, cute uncle with many stories to share and a 21 year old me with ears willing to listen. Thank you for impacting my life. We, as the youth of South Africa will keep fighting for the South Africa you imagined. I will dearly miss your company at every AKF event to come.

IN MEMORY OF THE REMARKABLE SHIRISH NANABHAI

By Pearl Masemola

I met uncle Shirish at the 2015 youth camp and although I only had a short ten minute conversation with him it felt as if I had known him for years. In that ten minutes I gained wisdom, laughed and was almost brought to tears by the stories he had to tell. In that ten minutes there is one thing that he said that still remains with me till this day. He said "make sure you learn as much as you can everyday and keep small reminders of where you have been and what you have done so that one day, you too will have stories to share". His heart has so much love to give that it radiated through out the entire camp. May his incredible, loving and humble spirit rest in peace. His legacy will forever remain with us, in our hearts.

By Irfaan Mangera

I, along with the AKF Youth of 2015 had the privilege of spending time with Uncle Shirish Nanabhai at last year's Robben Island Youth Leadership Camp. He travelled the long journey with us from Lenasia to Cape Town. Uncle Shirish shared with us his encounters in prison, which was inspiring but also deeply heartfelt.

His wealth of political experience during the Apartheid era made me realise the importance of preserving our history. The need for us as young people of South Africa to understand the dynamics of the struggle and learn from it.

Being imprisoned on the Island wasn't just harsh on the physical being but also on the mental and psychological aspects too. Uncle Shirish overcame and triumphed over the human spirit.

Through trials and tribulations he withstood the Iron Fist that was Apartheid. He was a true symbol of bravery and courage. We salute you Uncle Shirish.

Hamba Kahle Uncle Shirish!
Hamba Kahle Umkonto!
Today we lose a human.
A superhuman.
A man of
resistance and toil.
A veteran of the movement.
A symbol of
Triumph.
A fighter against injustice.
Today we lose a human.
A hero

Undisputed.
Armed
with a purple heart.
Hungry for freedom
Our freedom...
Today we lose a human.
Mortal and true
Steadfast on creating
Change.
A comrade
of the struggle.
A spear of the nation!

Sumaiyah Ally Kotty

Uncle Shirish ,a man with many stories, a man with endless courage and a man who taught me a lot just by his actions. As a one of many fortunate youth who got an opportunity to meet and as well as spend a week with him on Robben Island , with the Ahmed Kathrada Youth Foundation. Ive took note of him and his ways. He always had a smile on his a true , a smile of contentment not a smile he had to draw on every morning like most of us do. Just by his smile I learnt to be happy with what i have and just take life as it comes , and by doing that I can say I'm con-

tent jus like him and because of his smile my heart smiles too. He also had a wonderful quality in him and that was when he spoke to us he'd tell us stories of his past and he always spoke of the good his comrades done and he'd brag about their achievements which show how selfless he was and how happy he was for his comrades.He told us those stories for a reason and that reason is for us youth to carry on telling the so that his and comrades legacy can reach forever. Personally It's a privilege to have his stories in my memory and I will open heartedly love to share them with everyone. Uncle Shirish Thank You and May Your soul Rest In Peace.

We Love You



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With Compliments



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