

Ahmed Kathrada Foundation : Archives Box Description

Date:		Staff:	
Accession Number:		Box: 1 of 4	Shelve: S102
Title: AMK - Collection			
Paper	Records	Personal	
Description:			
Extent:			
Content:			
Inclusive Dates:			
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Box
1 of
4
FILES
1

?

- Rwanda Trial; Chapter 1: Life
not Death; Sentencing;
Arrival at Island & Descrip-
tion

2

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- Letters from Prison.

3

June - 1964

- Life on the Island.

4

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- Subjects treating on
the tapes

Box

old files

no - f/Bar

no - file description sheet

no box description sheet

no archive description sheet

no box label.

MALEEHAH MOOSA *Maleeha*

BOX: 05 , SHELF: 02 , FILES: 04

COMPONENT	CONTAINS	DOES NOT CONTAIN
FILE DESCRIPTION BARS	✓	
BOX DESCRIPTION SHEETS	✓	
ARCHIVE DESCRIPTION FORM	✓	
BOX LABELLING	✓	

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BOX

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4

FILE

1

1964/06/12th — Rivonia Trial; Chapter 1: Life,
not Death: Sentencing,
Arrival at Island & Descrip-
tion

It was Friday, June 12, 1964, ?? o'clock in the morning, in the Supreme Court, Pretoria. "The State vs. Nelson Mandela and Others", otherwise known as the Rivonia Trial, was over, and all eight of us waiting in the dock for sentence to be passed had been found guilty on the main charge of sabotage.

Nelson Mandela was accused no. 1. Accused no. 2 was Walter Sisulu, and the rest of us, in order, were Dennis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, myself Ahmed Kathrada, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni. Our co-accused Lionel Bernstein had been discharged at the very end of the trial (and promptly rearrested).

The small courtroom was packed with our immediate families and friends. [Anyone else? Were there lots of people just outside the door because they couldn't get in? Outside, crowds? SABC affair.]

The death penalty was applicable to our conviction. I cannot say how each one of us was coping with that awareness. If we were afraid, I think we did not show it.

Everyone rose for the entry of Mr Justice Quartus De Wet, Judge-President of the Transvaal, who had tried our case. When we sat down, it was as if everyone in the room was holding their breath. The judge seemed nervous, and wasted no time.

"I have heard a great deal during the course of this case about the grievances of the non-European population," he said. "The accused have told me, and their counsel have told me, that the accused, who are all leaders of the non-European population, have been motivated entirely by a desire to ameliorate these grievances. I am by no means convinced that the motives of the accused were as altruistic as they wished the Court to believe. People who organise a revolution usually plan to take over the

Government, and personal ambition cannot be excluded as a motive.

"The function of this Court, as is the function of a Court in any country, is to enforce law and order, and to enforce the laws of the State within which it functions.

"The crime of which the accused have been convicted, that is the main crime, the crime of conspiracy, is in essence one of high treason. The State has decided not to charge the crime in this form. Bearing this in mind, and giving the matter very serious consideration, I have decided not to impose the supreme penalty which in a case like this would usually be the proper penalty for the crime. But consistent with my duty, that is the only leniency which I can show.

"The sentence in the case of all the accused will be one of life imprisonment. In the case of the accused who have been convicted on more than one count, these counts will be taken together for purposes of sentence."

There was a general sigh of relief - not shock as one would expect at a life sentence, only relief - among us and among the spectators. The judge stood up and hurried away.

Our visitors were told to come back to Pretoria the next day for the last visit, and to collect our clothes and other belongings. An appointment was also made for our lawyers to see us the following Tuesday. Then Dennis Goldberg was taken away to the white prison, and we were returned to Pretoria Local.

We had been kept in single cells all the time since our arrest and right through the trial, but when we arrived at the prison we were told that we would be in one cell for that night, and for the next few days, and that we would be in Pretoria for some time.

Strictly speaking, according to prison regulations, Indians and coloureds should have been separated from Africans. But segregated accommodation was hardly ever implemented in any of the prisons where I've been. Generally we blacks were all mixed up. Separation was expensive, and there were always staff shortages.

When we had changed into prison clothes our warders said, "Look, although you are sentenced prisoners, we'll allow you to finish off the food that you have from outside." So we finished the food, and went to bed, I think around 9 or 10 o'clock. It was bitterly cold of course, mid-winter.

Round about 12 or maybe 1 in the morning, we heard footsteps and suddenly the lights went on. Warders unlocked the doors. "Get ready. Pack up all your things." Where are we going to? "We don't know, you will see - and hurry up."

We took our time of course, and got ready, not that we had many belongings, mainly a few books. Mandela and Sisulu had been sentenced before, so as serving prisoners they had already accumulated some books and other property. The rest of us, just newly sentenced, were not allowed to take anything with us - perhaps a book or so, I'm not sure.

We all had the same prison outfits. I don't remember exactly, but I think we had long pants. Not green, green came much later. Felt jacket... Not warm enough. Shoes we had. Socks too.

Now it was about 1 or 2 in the morning, and as soon as we were ready, they chained us, they handcuffed us to each other, in pairs, and put on leg-irons. [Can you remember which of you wasn't paired with another prisoner? Was he handcuffed to a warder?] We were then put into a van [was it a van?], and a huge escort of police, military and prisons department vehicles

conducted us to an airport base not far from Pretoria. It may have been Voortrekkerhoogte, I don't know.

There we were put into a plane. They didn't tell us, but we guessed that we were going to Robben Island. A military plane, bitterly cold. A lot of police and warders accompanied us - about three of them for each one of us. The plane was full.

We did talk, and they were not nasty or anything. In fact the colonel who was in charge gave us something to eat, his own, from his own, and if I remember correctly he was the security police chief. And there were snatches of conversation... Mandela has reminded me of a remark made to me by the security policeman Van Wyk (the man who had led the raid on Rivonia): "Oh no, you fellows won't serve your full sentence, you'll be out in five years' time, and you Kathrada being a bachelor, all the girls will be waiting for you..."

There was this cordiality on the plane.

Now, in retrospect, I'd say our main feeling was still relief, that nobody had been sentenced to death. I don't think we were particularly tense, but we were very cold. We had each been allotted two blankets from Pretoria Local, but they weren't enough to keep us warm; these military planes are very very cold. The police and warders were heavily clad, in overcoats and all that. The terrible thing about the plane was airsickness. My partner was Govan Mbeki, and he got sick, so in order to go to the toilet he had to drag me along with him because we were chained together, and they wouldn't unlock the handcuffs. That and the cold are what I remember now, the uncomfortable part of the trip.

They respected us, they didn't push us around.

On their side there was the anxiety, the fear, that there

might be widespread violence, or attempts to free us, and they knew they would be much happier if we were on the Island.

But we had been looking forward to seeing our visitors, our families, and they had promised, they had told our people to come back the next day, and they had also told the lawyers they could see us the next Tuesday. It was very dishonest on their part. So there was that disappointment, and anger too.

It was bitterly cold and windy on the Island, with an icy drizzle, when we landed, and there of course we had to change our clothes again. It's a rule that when you are transferred to another prison, the clothes you were wearing must be sent back to the prison they came from. We changed into our Robben Island clothes out in the open, in the rain.

And the clothes were not the same! There was outrage and anger when we saw those clothes. I was the youngest of the whole group, and I was given long trousers and a jersey and a canvas jacket, and socks and shoes. Mbeki was almost 20 years older than me, Sisulu 18, Mandela nearly 11. All my fellow prisoners got short trousers, and no socks. They were not supposed to have shoes either, because at that time Africans received only sandals, usually those sandals made from tyres, but in this particular case a concession was made and they did get shoes. Possibly because of who they were, and also because they were older people. One little favour.

It was already a bit lightish.

From the airstrip, we were taken in a vehicle to the prison. We were still in handcuffs [and leg-irons? When did they come off?]. Those were only removed once we were in our temporary quarters, a very old prison. The one where we were eventually going to stay was not quite ready, especially our

section, the single cells, which even the warders called the isolation cells.

When we arrived the only prisoner in the old jail was a political, George Peake, and he really tried to make us comfortable. He smuggled a bit of meat in to us, because he already had some connections, and you know when you switch over from normal food to jail food, most of it you don't feel like eating. Ja, you eat a little bit, and you are tense, in any case, so you can't really eat...

George was in his forties, a coloured man, and had been a member of the Cape Town City Council. Remember at that time coloureds and Indians were allowed to vote in the Cape municipal elections, and were also allowed to be councillors. He had been sentenced to three years I think, because the Sabotage Act had not yet been passed when he was caught trying to blow up part of the Roland Street jail. He could be only charged under the [?] Act.

He was a very popular type of person, and one who adjusted quickly to a new environment. He had been there a few months I think, alone in that whole big jail.

We stayed in the old jail from the 13th of June until the 25th.

During that time we worked for eight hours a day, with a half-hour break for lunch at 11 am. Supper was from 3 to half past 3, because the warders' shift ended at 4. They worked three 8-hour shifts.

Our work was chopping stones. Each of us sat on a low stone, with a piece of slate in front of us which we had to chop

with a hammer into smaller pieces until they were about gravel size. Most of us found it tough, and the hammer was quite heavy, a metal one. I even found it difficult to fill a wheelbarrow with that gravel, and right the wheelbarrow without tripping and falling. There is an art in it, there is a way to do these things. It was heavy, and we were not used to it. But Mandela had no trouble, he had been doing a lot of physical exercise outside, and he'd been a boxer, he was strong.

On June 25th the head of our defence team, Advocate Braam Fischer, came to the Island to discuss with us the possibilities of an appeal. [on what basis? reasons for refusal (very brief). reasons for K's refusal (also very brief). Exactly when did Molly F die? Did you know about it before Braam came? PLEASE FILL IN ALL OF THIS]

The same day as Braam Fischer's visit we were hurriedly moved from the old jail to the single cells, although they were not ready: the cement was not quite dry, and neither was the paint on the walls; the plumbing was not finished, we couldn't shower. But of course it was very secure, and isolated from the general cells, and that was presumably why they moved us, all of us. Because the 26th of June was a big ANC day¹, and the authorities may have expected some trouble.

The single cells were in a U-shaped block, and we were put into one wing of the U. The other was empty.

The cells were on both sides of a central corridor, so that

1. Anniversary of the day of mourning and protest that followed the shooting by the police on 1 May 1950 of 18 people... [complete this] (Now eclipsed by the 16th of June, Soweto day.)

half of them faced the courtyard, and the others the sea. Mine faced the sea, which was not very near but I could hear [true?] it. [Could you hear it sometimes/all the time/not at all?] There were two windows in the outside wall, each about the size and shape of a briefcase, perhaps a bit bigger, with 4 or 5 vertical bars. But they were too high to look out through, and there was nothing in my cell that I could stand on.

A much [true?] bigger window faced the passage. Its top portions could be opened out, but the bottom panes were fixed. We had to be under observation 24 hours a day, and it was the warders' duty to walk up and down the passage and watch us through the glass. Some of them were very enthusiastic about this aspect of their work, and they used to take off their shoes [boots?] and walk about in their socks, in the hope of catching us doing something illicit, especially after the time we were supposed to be asleep. The light was on all night, a bare 60W globe in the ceiling of each cell.

My cell, like all the others in the section, was about 8 ft [OK? = 2 1/2 m] square. The doorway had an iron grille that opened into the cell, and a wooden door opening into the passage.

The walls and the ceiling and the bars on the windows were grey. The paint may have been a bit shiny, I can't remember. The window sills were plain cement. One of the terrible things about prison is that you don't see colour.

The floor was grey, rough cement, and we slept on it on a sisal mat, under [how many, maximum, at the very beginning?] [thin, hard, threadbare ?? delete whichever don't apply, or replace] grey [true?] blankets. There was nothing else in the cell, only your pail and your plastic container of water. That was it, for most of us. Two prisoners in our section had a

table and a bench: Mandela who, with his previous conviction, was already registered and studying when he came to the Island, and George Peake.

By the time we were installed in the single cells, the warders had been systematically indoctrinated about who we were. The prison authorities painted a terrible picture of these wild terrorists, so much so that each time we were to go to the courtyard or to the bathroom, they would not open us up until there was a warder on the catwalk with his gun trained on us, because they expected that at any time we might jump on them and grab their guns and kill them. Literally scores of warders were brought in, from many prisons in South Africa, and they used to stare at us, just stand at our windows and stare at us. We felt like animals in a zoo. Some would stand for quite a few minutes just staring at us, and then walk on and stare at the person in the cell next door.

Having the lights on all night was tough in the beginning, so some of us got into the bad habit of sleeping with our heads covered. That's not easy either, but it was the lesser of the two evils. Strictly speaking it was not allowed, because our heads were supposed to be visible. (I have managed to get rid of the habit of sleeping with my head under the covers now.)

The morning warders coming on duty were supposed to switch off the lights, but they didn't always bother. And sometimes they were nasty. On rainy days when we couldn't go out to work, and couldn't see properly without lights inside the cells, they would make a point of switching them off.

Fourteen or fifteen other prisoners were brought into our

section from the general cells, mostly politicals, with a few criminals. Since George Peake's arrival, other politicals had come to the Island, but all of them had been put in the general cells, which had been completed earlier. We gathered that in the 1963 - 64 period there were 1500 - 1600 political prisoners on the Island. Many of them arrived after we did.

There seemed to be no pattern of selection for the isolation cells. Sisulu and Mandela were there, but our section was certainly not reserved for the so-called leadership of the ANC. The rest of our Rivonia group were not top ANC leaders or anything, and we had with us some very junior members of the ANC, as well as three completely illiterate peasants from the Transkei, who were in no way leaders of anything. Apparently some prisoners were put in with us on the instructions of the police, or as a result of some prison misdemeanour.

On the other hand among the political prisoners in the general cells there were lifers. The secretary of the Natal ANC was there, and he was never brought to the isolation cells.

In the communal cells, they were packed like sardines in the early 60s, apparently sixty or more in a cell intended to be occupied by about thirty.

A few days after we were moved to the single cells, there came somebody from Britain who was an author and supposedly an expert on prisons, to interview us. Just before this visitor arrived, we - the Rivonia people, no-one else - were given brand-new clothing. We had had new clothes when we arrived, and to have them replaced after a fortnight was unheard-of in prison. The same, but new. We had spent a few days without showering because the showers were not ready, but that morning

we were taken to another prison to shower.

When we met this visitor, Mandela in his usual way spoke up and said, joking, "You must come more often, because when you come we get new clothes. And we even get a chance to shower."

Mandela, he asserts himself. He knew our keepers wouldn't dare stop him in the presence of a visitor.

The visitor left (he could only have been an apologist for the SA government, otherwise he wouldn't have been allowed into the prison), but our officials remembered Mandela's remark. It was July, bitterly cold, even worse than when we arrived, and the next morning warders woke us up at half past 5. It was raining, and still dark. "Ja, julle wil mos bad. Kom!²." They took us to the old jail, and said "Now shower!" Icy water. Some of us had colds and coughs, but the warders said that was no excuse. "You fellows want to shower, Mandela your friend and leader said you want to shower, so shower."

We were not yet used to those cold showers, and until ours were ready, we were taken to the ones in the old jail every day. I don't know if it was worth it! [If this remark isn't clear, it will have to be something like: *I'm not sure if the points Mandela scored were worth their price!*]

2. Ja, so you want to bath. Come!