

Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada.

“While we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would want it to be a triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil. A triumph of wisdom and largeness of spirit against small minds and pettiness; a triumph of courage and determination over human frailty and weakness; a triumph of the new South Africa over the old.”

This searing injunction accompanies you from the moment you board the boat to Robben Island to long after you have again set foot on dry land. It reverberates through your mind as you imagine the thousands of political prisoners who were forced onto boats over the ages and incarcerated on the island, many of them never knowing if they would ever return again.

It pierces your consciousness as you walk through the tiny cells where men were locked up in isolation for years on end, shut off from contact with the outside world stripped of their freedom. It gnaws away at your soul as you think of the years they were forcibly separated from family and friends. Of the birthdays, weddings, funerals they missed.

It tears at your heart when you imagine how they had to deal with the news of the death of a parent, sibling, family member, close friend, loved one knowing that they would not be able to be there to say their final goodbyes.

There can be nothing crueller than sentencing someone to life imprisonment, nothing more cynical and inhumane than depriving someone of their freedom because of their ideals and beliefs.

And yet, after spending more than a quarter of a century of his life locked up for believing in the ideals of freedom and democracy, 17 of which were spent on Robben Island, Ahmed Mohammed Kathrada, who penned these remarkable words, enjoins us to think of Robben Island as reflecting the triumph of freedom and human dignity over oppression and humiliation.

Sir, we are deeply humbled to have you in our midst today. You are truly one of the founding fathers of our democracy, one of the standard bearers of our struggle for freedom, dignity, human rights and equality. The symbolic significance of today I'm sure will not have escaped you:

More than half a century ago, almost to this very day, on 12 June 1964 you were sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour at the end of the Rivonia Trial, along with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Dennis Goldberg, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi and Andrew Mlangeni. And on 13 June, before your family had even had a chance to say their goodbyes, you and your comrades were bundled onto a special aircraft and flown to Robben Island, which would be your home for the next 17 plus years.

Ahmed Mohammed Kathrada – Kathy, as he is more popularly and affectionately known – was born in Schweizer-Reneke on 31 August 1929, where he would experience his first political awakening. And it was a very young awakening. By the age of 10, he was distributing political leaflets and at the age of 12, he became a member of the Young Communist League. By the age of 17, he had become a full-time political activist. And by the age of 35 – the youngest of the sentenced Rivonia trialists – he began his life sentence. Musing about his first trip to Cape Town as a young man in 1948, he says in his memoirs that he had tried to visit Robben Island at the time but was refused a permit:

“Clearly, since I was so keen to get there, the government eventually helped fulfill my wishes ... I only wanted to visit the island for a few hours in 1948, but I eventually spent nearly eighteen years there.”

He was released from prison on 13 October 1989 (I understand why you say in your memoirs that the number 13 has a special significance for you!), a few months after his 60th birthday. And immediately was thrust into the fray of negotiating the birth of our new democracy. He was active in the new government of national unity of the new democratic South Africa, serving in Parliament and in the Presidency of Nelson Mandela as parliamentary counsellor (gratefully missing out – his sentiments – on becoming Minister of Correctional Services in Mandela’s first cabinet). Would that indeed not have been the sweetest irony for someone who spent so much of his life in one or other prison!

And his activism has not diminished. He was active in establishing Robben Island as a national museum and World Heritage Site. And today he is founder and chairperson of the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation – to which he has brought his immense prestige and standing – to strengthen our democracy through deepening non-racialism and promoting human rights.

Kathy has been an indelible and fixed feature of our political life for more than 70 years. He was directly involved in almost every major campaign that marks our struggle for freedom and democracy. He has been associated (and personally connected) with and to every struggle icon who we pay tribute to for their enormous contribution to freedom in our country: Yusuf Dadoo, Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Albert Luthuli, Helen Joseph, Bram Fischer, Arthur Chaskalson – the list is comprehensive and daunting.

I know now that I am embarrassing Kathy. For one of the most endearing qualities of this man we are honouring today – of which all his old comrades, Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu in particular, speak glowingly – is his deep-seated humility and intrinsic humanism.

When the ANC decided to bestow its highest honour on him, Kathy typically questioned whether he was deserving of such recognition, citing other comrades he believed more worthy.

Kathy left in his final year of school to become a full-time political activist. He finished his matric through part-time study and, but for a brief spell at Wits University, did not return to formal tertiary study until he was on Robben Island.

But education has always being a critically important part of his life. He teases that he was probably one of the earliest proponents of the misguided doctrine of ‘liberation before education’ for dropping out of his formal studies to become a full-time political activist. If there is one thing in his life that he would do differently if he had the chance, he often tells the youth, is combine his activism with pursuing his studies. They are not mutually exclusive. If anything, they complement each other.

On the island he embraced his studies with zeal and commitment. In his letters to his family, he told them to let his mother know that he was not actually in prison, but at university. He was the first Robben Island prisoner to complete a university degree. He went on to complete a second degree and two honours degrees. And, but for the advent of television – which was made to available to him in his final years as a political prisoner – he jokingly says, he would have come gone on to do a master’s.

Kathy’s many writings have become pearls of wisdom. Speaking about how one who is incarcerated approaches ‘time’ in prison, he shares these profound insights in one of his letters to a niece:

“The most common form of measuring one’s time in prison is by calculating the number of years: in our case in terms of cold statistics this amounts to 25 years, 5 months and some days. Looked at from such a restricted angle, one simply gets a picture of fragmented units of time – monotonous, drab, unchanging, unexciting and tedious. It does not cover the essentially vibrant community that inhabits a world within a world – its spectrum of experiences, its collective and individual emotions, thrills and responses, its fears, its joys and sorrows, its hopes, its confidences, its loves and hates, the unbreakable spirit, the fellowships, the hardships, the morale. These and much more make up the prison community. Naturally these generalised feelings find expression in a myriad specific forms in every hour of every day every year.”

He is known equally for his uproarious sense of humour, bordering on the irreverent. On his pending release, he wrote mischievously to his good friend, Eddie Daniels – who had spent 18 years on the island with him and was released a few years before his own release:

“I’m still single and eligible. Now don’t let the young ladies rush to end my bachelorhood. Who knows, just as Genghis [Eddie’s dog] has acquired the looks and characteristics of his companion/master (and vice versa) I, too, may not have remained free from such mutations. After all, for two decades plus, I have lived among a variety of fauna – ostriches, rabbits, buck Alsatians, Dobermans – and yourself! At this stage I don’t know resemblance to which of these species is least preferable.”

And a part of him that he keeps hidden, but which comes shining through in his writings, is his unabashed romanticism. For all of his historical materialism, Kathy also is happy to accept the role of ‘fate’ in life. Of his life partner, Barbara Hogan, he says that he knew even before he met her, that their destinies were going to be in some way intertwined.

“While on the island, I had taken a keen interest in her case [she was facing her own political trial which would lead to 10 years imprisonment] and when we were introduced, I was definitely impressed.”

Sir, your life has been intertwined with the trials and tribulations of our country since the 1940s. Every decade since then has been punctuated by your looming presence and unyielding commitment to a free, non-racial, democratic South Africa.

A few years ago we were honoured to bestow a doctorate on your close friend, brother and comrade, Prisoner 466/64.

Chancellor, I have the honour to present, for the award of the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, Prisoner 468/64.