

## Chapter 5

# Into Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK)

We landed at Luanda airport after sunset and were immediately whisked away in a Soviet Gaz 4x4 car that dropped us at a house in the city centre. A few people in camouflage uniform drove in and out of the yard; they all looked in a hurry to get somewhere. The gentleman who seemed to be responsible for the house offered us food and showed us mattresses to sleep on. The following day, someone gave us notepads and asked us to write down our biographies. It seemed that every step of the way we had to write our biographies, which we found extremely annoying.

It was only later that I understood why that had been necessary: it was one of the ways of checking for inconsistencies in the account that new recruits gave of themselves. All the different biographies, written at different stages and in different places, eventually ended in the MK department of intelligence and security (NAT). Agents were sent by the apartheid regime to infiltrate the ANC and MK, and their handlers gave them an assumed story, or 'legend', as it was called in intelligence circles. The agent had to memorise the legend to camouflage his or her true identity or the real story of why and how he or she had left the country. However, fundamental inconsistencies often arose the more the story was repeated. Questions based on different versions of them would often reveal further inconsistencies that would lead to the legend falling flat. At that point, the spy would hopefully confess the real story.

The NAT interviewers had to be able to distinguish between normal human error and a manufactured story. Unfortunately, the ability to do that also depended a great deal on good training and human acumen. Some innocent cadres were wrongly labelled 'enemy agents' and paid a high price for human error.

The following day, Masuku, Kalushi and Nkosi were told to collect their belongings. We shook hands and hugged, and they departed.

A few days later, I was one of a number of men in two Gaz trucks driving towards the town of Benguela, a two-hour drive south of Luanda. A few were

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armed with AK-47 machine guns and hand grenades. We were all wearing camouflage uniforms and black military boots. It was evident to me that some of the people in the trucks had been together for some time, as they readily called one another by their *noms de guerre*. They also told stories about where they had been in the past few weeks or months. A few of us were still the odd ones out. We were still trying to get acquainted with the rowdy, singing, chanting group. Most had left the country after the June 16 uprisings. The freshness of the language and the currency of their stories said it all.

The trucks came to a stop in Benguela. We were told that our destination was still some distance away. We drove through the town and started following a dusty, well-used road. By that time, the excitement of song and dance had died down, both from anxiety and exhaustion. Our transport eventually trundled into what looked like old, abandoned railway warehouses. We had arrived at Novo Catengue, which we were told would be our training camp. A few trainees in uniform were already there: some were erecting tents, while others were clearing the yard. We were then allocated different sleeping quarters. I was lucky to be shown into what looked like an old hostel building that must have served as accommodation for railway workers in the past. Each room could accommodate about eight or ten people. Others were placed in tents.

Over the following weeks and months, more recruits who had left South Africa after the Soweto uprising joined us: a handful were women. We were organised into standard military formations of companies, platoons and sections. There were four companies, each made up of two platoons, and in each platoon there were four sections of roughly ten people. I fell under Company 2. Our commander was Desert (real name Frans Thapelo), while Che O’Gara (real name January Masilela) was the commissar. They had left South Africa before 16 June 1976. Julius Mokoena was the overall camp commander and Thami Zulu (real name Muzi Ngwenya) was the chief of staff. Mark Shope, former general secretary of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (Sactu), became the political commissar and head of political education. Shope left South Africa after being prosecuted for supporting the campaigns of the ANC. He died in 1998 after returning to South Africa.

The bulk of our military training was conducted by a contingent of Cuban officers, and our company fell under a Cuban officer we nicknamed ‘Fire’ because that was the command he gave us to attack imaginary enemy targets during training. Technical training involved gun handling and control, explosives, shooting from different positions, physical training, and

manoeuvres around physical obstacles. The weapons we used included pistols (mainly Soviet Makarovs), AK-47s, heavy-calibre machine guns, bazookas and surface-to-surface rocket launchers. The explosives we used mainly comprised TNT, limpet mines, landmines and dynamite. Physical training was intense. Among other things, we had to run many kilometres with our AK-47s on our shoulders. The most challenging of those runs was the stretch between our camp and Benguela.

Shope organised the detachment into different political classes. He recruited some of the trainees and gave them crash courses in political education. His curriculum was heavily biased towards the history of the trade union struggle in South Africa and the world. He was obviously very passionate about trade unionism and the role unions were playing in the liberation struggle.

There was often tension between the political training we received from Shope and our military training at the hands of Cuban instructors. The Cubans felt that there was too much emphasis on political education at the expense of drive and the urgency to go back to South Africa to launch military action. They felt that our cadres were not physically and mentally prepared for military confrontation with the apartheid forces. The tension was unfortunate because both aspects of the training were equally important. The Cubans' criticism could be forgiven because they had no detailed understanding of the dynamics of South African politics and society. They also did not appreciate the tortuous route MK guerrillas had to take to infiltrate South Africa from Angola. The Frontline States – Mozambique, Swaziland, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Lesotho – were under tremendous pressure from the apartheid regime to flush ANC and MK representatives out of their territories.

The experience of the Cuban revolution was also vastly different from what was feasible in South Africa. Fidel Castro started his campaign using a few dedicated comrades; his strategy worked because of the confluence of many factors that were absent in South Africa. Our Cuban instructors did not have a full understanding of the differences; they also did not appreciate the nature of oppression and colonialism in our country. Their approach was overly militaristic.

We took turns hunting for game in the bush. Popular animals for hunting were zebra, springbok and eland. It was always difficult to carry a carcass several kilometres back to the camp. Occasionally, we brought back pythons and tortoises. Skinning a python was one of the most difficult tasks to

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perform given the sheer toughness of its skin. The meat was also tough to cook. It took hours, but the taste was worth the patience. Tortoises were subjected to the most painful kind of death. We dug a hole in the ground and put the animal in it with its underbelly facing upwards. We then shut the hole with an iron sheet or corrugated iron. We made a fire on top of the iron sheet and slowly roasted the creature alive because it was difficult to kill. The result was a sumptuous delicacy that tasted like roast chicken.

There were hair-raising moments during the hunting expeditions. One day five of us went out hunting and suddenly saw a pride of lions sitting behind an anthill. There must have been six of them. We always had our AK-47 machine guns on combat-ready whenever we went hunting. More than the lions, the predator we feared the most was the leopard, which surprises its prey. The lions were surprised by our sudden appearance; they turned their heads and looked at us with distant curiosity. Somebody whispered that we should not stop but continue walking as if nothing had happened. Our fingers were now firmly on the trigger. We were ready to empty our magazines at them had they made a threatening move. They remained motionless.

We walked further before encountering a zeal of zebras. We agreed to isolate two of them that we wanted to kill. They started to scamper around, creating a good opportunity for us to train our AK47s. We squeezed the triggers and two were left on the ground. We slit their throats to allow the blood to flow out. We radioed for a Gaz truck to come and help us transport our trophies.

Doing night guard duty at a camp outpost preyed on the nerves. Outposts were roughly a kilometre from the camp. A trainee would be deployed as a guard on his own in the deep and dark bush. Often, when I was there, I would hear the blood-curdling sounds of wild predators pulling down their prey. Then I would hold my AK-47 tight, finger on the trigger with cold sweat running down my spine. I would hear the growl of a lion not far away knowing that it was capable of picking up the scent of a human in the breeze. I would grope around my waist for hand grenades. Two extra magazines were fastened together for ease of reloading. My eyes would strain to see the dark shadowy apparitions in the distance. My mind would wonder whether the big rock I was using as a parapet was the lair of a black mamba yet to return from a hunting expedition.

In June 1977, barely five months after parting with Kalushi and his two homeboys, I got the news that he had been arrested after a shoot-out in

Johannesburg. According to the media, he was part of a unit of three guerrillas who went back into South Africa. I was very sad. I did not recognise the names of the other two guerrillas, so I knew they were not Thomas Masuku and Stephen Nkosi.

Kalushi was executed by the apartheid regime on 6 April 1979. In remembrance, I wrote an article for an MK journal called *Dawn* in which I recalled stories that he had told me while we were marooned in Memo:

‘I remember one time when he told me how, when he was still young, he used to caddy at the Irene Golf Course in Pretoria in order to get to the cinema. How he used to staffride at the local Denneboom Railway Station to catch a train to his part-time job. Solly was a good utility soccer player. Just before he left the country, he was playing for the Continental Soccer Club. The money he was able to earn usually paid for his school career, especially the buying of books to help his mother.’

One hot evening in September 1977, the camp went out on night training in the bush. My section was standing in a formation taking instructions when three trainees fell ill. One after another, they squatted on the ground and complained of severe stomach pains. The instructor asked them to take it easy, sit down and wait to see if the pain continued. A few minutes later, the instructor received a radio call from the camp asking if everything was all right with the trainees. He said everything was fine except for three who were complaining of stomach pain. The instructor was then informed that the commander had received similar information from other units in the bush. We were then ordered to get back to the camp as soon as possible.

We found that the camp had become a big emergency hospital. A number of trainees were lying on their stomachs groaning or vomiting. Others were squatting outside the barracks crying and others were praying. Some were wailing into the dark, calling on their mothers or fathers to pray for them. Others were already declaring that they were about to die. By that time, I had felt no discomfort, but I had always had a very tough stomach. It soon became evident that the source of the ailment was the food we had eaten for supper before going out on training. All those who had fallen ill complained of similar symptoms: an excruciating, slicing pain in the stomach, dizziness, weakness, diarrhoea and vomiting.

The Cuban instructors and doctors were not affected – they lived in their

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own compound and had their own cooking arrangements. The separation of amenities had caused some resentment among our trainees: they felt the Cubans were taking all of the best amenities and food. Some of those complaints were mischievous – the Cubans were instructors and doctors, not trainees. They had come from a liberated country and were making a revolutionary sacrifice driven by internationalism. They were not expected to subject themselves to the conditions of MK trainees and junior officers.

That separation was of great benefit to us when the food poisoning happened, as the Cuban doctors went around pumping everyone who was ill with injections and tablets. They were able to help those who were vomiting uncontrollably and to carry those who could not walk. Wailing, groans and loud prayers went on the entire night. What had happened that evening was a great revealer of character: it distinguished the weak characters from those who were made of sterner stuff. When everything was over, some of the trainees were utterly embarrassed about what they had said when they thought they were about to die.

The following morning, I felt some looseness in my bowels. I walked out into the bush at the back of our barracks where we had dug a furrow that we used for relieving ourselves. When it was full we would refill it with soil and dig another one in a different place. I pulled down my camouflage trousers and tried to relieve myself. Nothing came out. But there was a hot burning feeling in my stomach, and I felt that I was about to soil myself. I could not put on my trousers because I was afraid of splashing them with my own excrement. The longer I squatted, the more powerless I became and the more painful my stomach became. Tiny droppings began to come out, but that did not relieve the pain or restore my strength. I tried to stand up and was no longer able to lift myself from a squatting position. I became very dizzy. I was fast losing both my bearings and my balance. I decided to support myself on all fours.

Two trainees passed by. They realised that something untoward was afoot. They called my name. I could not respond; I was losing the ability to speak. They told me to stand up and walk with them to the barracks. I shook my head and murmured something inaudible. My speech was ebbing away fast. They put my arms around their shoulders and pulled me up. They helped pull up my trousers and fastened my belt. They carried me on their shoulders back to the barracks. A Cuban doctor gave me injections. I fell asleep immediately.

It took a few days before everyone had fully recovered. A security

investigation soon revealed how the epidemic had come about – one of the trainees with access to the kitchen had dropped poison into one of the large cooking pots. The investigation exposed the culprit, who was in my section during our training. We had been proud of the man: he was the best trainee in the camp in overcoming physical obstacles and his soldier's uniform was always spick and span. To crown it all, he was chosen as the best trainee in the detachment at the end of our training course. It turned out that he had been thoroughly trained by the apartheid regime before infiltrating MK in order to help him scale the rungs of promotion and leadership more quickly than the rest of us. One of his missions was to poison the camp and kill as many trainees as possible.

That poisoning incident was the worst experience we had suffered in what was a very rough environment. Running water was a luxury as it was only intermittently available. Most of the time, we relied on muddy water from the springs around the camp that we had to boil before use. Sometimes, drinking water was brought in tanks from Benguela. The nights were infested with mosquitoes and voracious biting insects. Initially, snakes and spiders were a constant menace. As the camp filled up and took in more recruits and as tent construction spread, they slowly moved away.

The food was tasteless and repetitive. We had to take turns sitting around the cooking area removing worms and other alien elements from our mealie rice and beans. The other staple food was canned fish and beef of very low quality. We had an abundant supply of cheap Soviet and Cuban cigarettes. Many of us took up smoking because it was the only pastime that was always available. We drank gallons of black tea and smoked deep into the night while reminiscing about home or anticipating our next deployment.

We completed our military training in 1978 and were no longer trainees but soldiers and officers. ANC president Oliver Tambo presided over our rite of passage, naming us the 'June 16 Detachment'.

In that same year, I was chosen to go to a Lenin International School in the Soviet Union. There were ten in our group: six men and four women. There were a number of such schools in the Soviet Union, which were set up mainly to train fighters from national liberation movements. They also catered for people from developing countries that were politically aligned with the Soviet Union or at least non-aligned. Members of communist or socialist parties from well-established capitalist countries were also accommodated. As members of liberation movements, our stay and training were always kept secret and we were separated from other nationalities.

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The school was akin to a boutique boarding institution. It was located in Nagornove in a sparse forest some 50 kilometres outside of Moscow. Everything was plentiful. We had enough good food of every kind. We had an unlimited supply of alcoholic drinks: mainly vodka, but also beer, cognac and white and red wine from Russia and other Eastern European countries, and Cuban rum.

We arrived in Moscow at the beginning of winter. Snow was a new and big challenge for us: it lay everywhere in mounds and hillocks. One of our first outings was to Lenin's Mausoleum next to the Kremlin. Snowflakes were coming down like confetti; our overcoats and *shapkas* (fur hats) made us look like cockroaches emerging from a baker's pantry. We filed slowly and quietly into the mausoleum. There he was! Lenin! His embalmed body had shrunk considerably but his face was what we had seen in portraits, movies and sculptures. Inside the mausoleum, we had some reprieve from the searing snow. When we emerged from the shelter, we were immediately caught in the frozen surroundings again.

With time, we began to get used to the snow. We began to learn what to eat to build up body heat and resistance. We ate a lot of fatty foods. We put layers and layers of butter on our bread. We learnt quickly how to drink vodka straight, without a chaser. Every time we came back from an outing, the Soviet guide poured us all a stiff tot. We would then be asked to raise our glasses and holler 'Na zdorovie (Cheers)!' Then we had to throw the drink down our throats in one gulp. It took the chill away like a spell. We carried bottles of beer to our dormitories, opened windows and pushed bottles into the mounds of snow outside. Snow was piled up to the window sill. It became our natural freezer.

The curriculum was largely based on the theory of Marxism-Leninism. In a simple sense, that meant Lenin and the Soviet interpretation of Marxism for practical implementation in the service of national liberation movements and the transformative role of socialist and communist revolutions. The main example we studied was the Russian Revolution of 1917. Revolutionary events leading up to that and the titanic struggle to defend and advance its gains was what informed the basis of Marxist-Leninist theory. Lessons learnt and failures that revolutionaries experienced during that revolution were transposed to other revolutionary or transformative agendas around the world. The premise was that they could be applied anywhere because, fundamentally, they were based on the materialist science of human evolution and social development espoused by Karl Marx.

Lenin also said that national liberation struggles around the world had the potential to undermine capitalist imperialism. He saw them as objective allies in the global socialist struggle.

Elements of the broad curriculum were political economy, philosophy, the theory and tactics of national liberation, media studies, social psychology, the experience of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and other relevant revolutions around the world. Media studies were geared towards formulating and disseminating liberation propaganda while countering negative messages from oppressive regimes and counter-revolution. Political economy classes were the most engrossing: they largely entailed a critique of capitalism and its highest form, imperialism. That was juxtaposed against the socialist economy as the basis for building a future communist society.

The fulcrum of the political economy class was the study of capital, the labour theory of value and the nature of commodities. The central reference material was Marx's *Das Kapital, Volume 1*, Parts 1 and 2. We learnt that the labour theory of value was not Marx's brainchild but that of David Ricardo, a British classical economist. Ricardo argued that the price value in a commodity represents the labour spent in producing it. Marx expanded on Ricardo and argued that it was not simply the price value that was at the core of capitalism. He said that the production and exchange of goods is part of a larger social organisation that involved the ownership of the means of production (raw materials, factories, machines and so on). He further asserted that the production of goods is dependent on working people's labour, which creates the surplus value embedded in the value of a commodity.

Wages paid are only enough to sustain workers' livelihoods, the argument ran. They are just enough for the workers to buy food, clothes, secure shelter and sustain their families. Those are basic necessities to ensure that workers are physically fit enough and ready to come back to work the following day. Marx said that the reality, however, is that workers produce more value during the working time than they are paid in the form of wages. The value over and above the wage remains with the employer and is called 'surplus value'. The aim of the employer is to increase the surplus value by, among other mechanisms, increasing working hours, increasing the pace of work and increasing the speed of the conveyor belt.

The production of value is therefore a social process that creates a perpetual antagonism between those who own the means of production and those who own the labour power that creates surplus value and makes profits

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possible. Workers own neither the means of production, the surplus value in the commodity nor the profits that arise from the exchange of commodities. The capitalist owns the means of production, the commodities produced, the surplus value and the profits at the end of the chain.

The fundamental aim of the owner is to accumulate more profit that is built into capital to acquire more means of production, produce more commodities and make more profit. The vicious circle continues along those lines. Part of the maximisation of that process relies on extracting more labour power from the workforce who depend on wages to survive.

Marx's theory argues that a commodity under capitalism has both 'use-value' and 'exchange-value'. In medieval times, people bartered goods in the marketplace for what they needed for their own personal use, for example, a goat for a bag of wheat. That is use-value and it is intrinsic to the commodity. However, a commodity also has another universal value that makes it easy to buy, not necessarily for immediate personal need and use, but to be sold for more money. It can be sold for money because it carries a universal value equivalent to the labour expended in producing it. That constitutes the exchange-value. The exchange-value is not intrinsic to the commodity but it is social and depends on society's system of economic interdependence that makes the exchange possible and desirable.

The theory of socialism and communism is to try to eliminate that perpetual antagonism. Marx said that that is what constitutes the essence of exploitation. What was needed, he argued, was to create communal ownership of the means of production and to provide equitable access to the commodities that society produces.

The inputs, questions and debates in those lectures were surprisingly open and rigorous. What made the debates even more interesting was what happened to the economy of Russia immediately after the 1917 Revolution. The nationalisation of industries and farm production led to the collapse of the economy and engendered widespread shortages of commodities. It created mass resentment against the revolution. Shortages combined with the devastation of the civil war created untold suffering. The incentive to work and produce was severely dampened.

Against strenuous opposition from within his Bolshevik party, Lenin introduced what he called the New Economic Policy (NEP) – a form of mixed economy that allowed the co-existence of the private and the public sectors. It also encouraged foreign investment in certain sectors by providing concessions to foreign capitalists. Peasants were allowed to keep part of their

holdings as private property and paid tax to the State. The economy improved dramatically after that. People were motivated to work hard and produce for profit again.

For Lenin, the NEP was not surrender but the Russian Revolution correcting itself according to the true teachings of Marx. Marx had argued that a communist revolution was only possible in countries that had attained mature capitalism. So Lenin reckoned that Russia needed to build a firm capitalist base first for the revolution to survive. It needed to build a strong working-class political culture as the foundation on which the revolution could be buttressed. So in a sense, Lenin realised that the Russian Revolution of 1917 had put the cart before the horse. It needed to be reversed in a smart way in order to ensure its sustainability.

Lenin died in 1924, and by 1928, Joseph Stalin had gained control of the Bolshevik Party. He abolished the NEP and introduced Five-Year Plans, nationalised industries and collectivised the farms. That spelt the death of Lenin's NEP project.

As students, we found the NEP a significant compromise by Marxism and an admission of the limitations of the theory of how to build socialism and communism. The NEP appealed to the world we related to. We could not fully comprehend an egalitarian communist society where there was no private ownership of property and where everybody depended on a communal pool of commodities. We were of the view that if such a society were to be attained in the future, it would not happen in our lifetime or that of our great-grandchildren. We could comprehend, appreciate and support the benefits of the socialist society that we witnessed in the Soviet Union, Cuba and other socialist states. We could not, however, fathom a fully-fledged communist state. As a result, some of the debates we had with our lecturers were never finally settled.

Thankfully, our lecturers taught us that Marxism was not a dogma but a living science. They taught that it was not so much the answers we provided that were cardinal but the arguments that supported them. We had to customise our arguments to our own situation in South Africa. What became apparent to us was that socialist economic theories were not a ready-made panacea for the challenges of capitalism and those facing our country. Marx and Lenin left a lot of questions unanswered. There was a theory that left many aspects to the creative imagination of future social practitioners.

We were also required to interpret and apply Marxist-Leninist theory in the conduct of our national liberation struggle. That is why part of the

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curriculum consisted of an analysis of the balance of social forces, mass mobilisation, propaganda and work among enemy forces. We were also required to go beyond the first stage of the attainment of political power. We had to reflect on how the political attainment of power could be defended against counter-revolution and how the new society would be constructed. We were lectured on the building blocks of constructing a socialist society without having to go through all of the capitalist stages that Marx and Lenin had outlined as preconditions for a successful socialist revolution. Our lecturers called it the 'the non-capitalist way of development'.

We were taught that for the non-capitalist route to succeed, a few concrete conditions had to be in place. One was a strong socialist community of states. We were told that such a community already existed, led by the Soviet Union. We had no reason to doubt that. That socialist community would serve as the bulwark against imperialist machinations designed to stifle non-capitalist development.

The second condition was the strong worldwide solidarity of the working-class movement. Examples were made of mass strikes in France and other countries in 1968, when the working class played a big role in paralysing the government. That strike sucked in about 10 million people and threatened the government's survival. We were reminded that the 1968 movement spread across major cities in a number of developed countries. Mass movements of protest against the Vietnam War erupted in the US, Berlin, Rome and elsewhere in Europe. Those were cited as examples of the growing solidarity of the anti-capitalist world working-class movement. Solidarity between the international trade union movement and trade unions in South Africa was given as a concrete example. Theoretically, we appreciated the argument.

The need for the existence of a revolutionary liberation party in our own country was also put forward as a precondition. In that regard, we felt that we could not be found wanting: we could point to both the ANC and the SACP.

The last precondition was the existence of a reliable and advanced working-class movement in our country. That was also not in doubt in our minds. We had arguably the strongest trade union formations and the biggest, most advanced working-class movement on the African continent. Based on those factors, we considered the non-capitalist way a possibility in South Africa.

Our contact with the outside world at the school was very limited and

controlled. We were given a monthly stipend for our personal use and were allowed over weekends to go into the city to shop. We would be dropped off by a school bus and would have to reassemble at that exact spot at a set time to be taken back to the school.

Occasionally, we would bump into ANC students who were studying at the University of Moscow. What surprised us were their complaints about the Soviet Union. They told us that we had not seen the true nature of the country because, at the Lenin School, we were cushioned from the harsh reality of Soviet society. They told us that there was rampant racism among the Russians, and that it was dangerous for Black students to go alone to a remote part of the city, as they were harangued and even beaten up for no reason. They told us that there was massive poverty among the Russian lower classes, especially in rural towns where they used to conduct academic experiments. The few drunks that we used to see sprawled in the snow in the alleys of Moscow, they told us, were the tip of the iceberg. They were convinced that the Soviet economy was built on clay and that it was a big lie that would crumble like a house of cards. We could not reconcile those assertions with the military might of the Soviet state: in Red Square, we had witnessed grandiose displays of missiles and military aircraft.

After those depressing discussions, we would go back to school, quaff down our vodka and reflect. We could not disprove the claims of the students but dismissed them as counter-revolutionaries. Their assertions, however, stayed in the back of our minds and began to affect our perceptions. For example, we began to emphasise the difference in quality between Soviet-made shoes and the Florsheim or Stetson shoes we knew from back home. There was no comparison between the Soviet transistor radios and the Philips radios we had been accustomed to in South Africa. We tried to find a way of rationalising what we could not ignore. We defended the Soviet Union by arguing that cheaper mass production made it possible for the poor to access products, while in capitalist countries, production was for the few who could afford it. So the rationalisation went on. We refused to contemplate the possibility that some of the things the students were saying were true.

The final rationalisation was to tell ourselves that if we started seeing weaknesses and faults in the Soviet Union, who else could we turn to in our quest to liberate our country? We convinced ourselves to turn a blind eye to what was wrong with our host. The most important thing was that the Soviet Union was the only society that was prepared to give us guns, education, political support and the other means we needed to liberate our people. To

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us that was the bottom line. Anything else was a luxury we could not afford and was reserved for armchair revolutionaries and social observers.

Our access to the mass media was also limited: we were mainly exposed to Soviet TV and programmes from other socialist countries that mostly involved a heavy dose of culture we did not understand. At first, even classical music and ballet – the main televised entertainment apart from soccer, ice hockey and gymnastics – were foreign to us. I began to read more purposefully about that unfamiliar but refined culture that our isolation and Bantu Education in South Africa had denied us. I also thought of my experience with jazz and how I had grown into it and understood that it held lessons for my new inquiry. I was going through the same learning curve that I had experienced at Vryheid High when I came across the revolutionary and liberating nature of American jazz. I enjoyed the learning experience. The more I was exposed to and read, the more I began to appreciate the exalted achievements that inspired and were inspired by the culture of ballet and classical music.

It was interesting to realise that a lot of our negative attitudes toward foreign cultures were the result of ignorance. The more one gets to understand what informs the culture of other people, the easier it is for one to appreciate it. The same simple rule applies to sport: the sooner one learns the rules that govern a game, the easier it is to understand and enjoy.

One day, we were taken to the world-famous Bolshoi Theatre. It was a stupendous encounter with a world I had never experienced or imagined. The outing started with sightseeing at the grandiose Kremlin and Red Square. Saint Basil's Cathedral, an ornately beautiful feature of Red Square, is an imperial affirmation of Russia's sixteenth-century expansionist aristocracy. The walls and the roof of the Grand Kremlin Palace exude Tsarist opulence, and it is beautifully reflected on the calm waters of the Moscow River in the foreground. That opulence extends to the interior with a richness of architecture both Byzantine and Renaissance. The GUM Department Store, where we did most of our shopping, has a massive roof made of heavy glass, a modern addition to a wondrous skyline.

We walked to the Bolshoi Theatre from Red Square. The exterior of the building is monumental and imposing: huge columns greeted us from a distance; four statuesque horses on top of it were running a race into the evening sky.

The interior of the Bolshoi Theatre was a marvel to behold. The huge foyer and corridors were clad in red velvet with coloured trimmings. As we walked

into the grand entrance, I cast my eyes around the colossal vault of gold mosaic. Goose bumps crawled across my body. Huge classical murals were gliding across the sky-blue ceiling. They seemed to be keeping a jealous watch over the huge multi-tiered crystal chandelier. I could hear the sound of the orchestra tuning up in the pit below the massive stage.

The last bell rang and we sank into our velvet seats. The expansive stage curtain stood heavy and motionless in front of us, a beautiful golden tapestry of woven material. When it lifted, we all fell silent. A court of clowns was dancing on stage. Then a flock of swans emerged. It was a majestic sight as they drifted across the stage with their wings flailing. The orchestra accompanied the glide in a soaring crescendo, laying the basis for a virtuoso performance. The music was at times warlike, then it would suddenly turn jovial and cheery. It sent the ballerinas on a one-legged whirlwind spin, with the other leg pointing at the ceiling above. The beautiful tutus twirled like flying saucers. By the time we saw the swans pristinely drifting away across the lake, our day was sublimely done.

We visited the Bolshoi Theatre a number of times after that. It was an impressive exposure to some of the best opera and ballet in the world. However, the rendering of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* stood out as the gem in my mind.

We also had the honour of visiting the Winter Palace in the Hermitage Museum. We took a train from Moscow to Leningrad (today's St Petersburg). It was an enjoyable trip, largely because it was summer, which gave us a marvellous chance to explore the countryside and the vast rich grasslands that inspired the Russian *kulaks* to resist Stalin's forced collectivisation.

Leningrad is a beautiful city with wide-open spaces. The Winter Palace could not have been located in a better place. A majestic piece of Baroque architecture, it sits on the bank of the Neva River. The guide told us that it served as the main residence of the Russian tsars before the revolution. We were treated to the works of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Van Gogh and many others. The guide also told us that if we took just one minute to look at each exhibit in the Hermitage, we would have to set aside 11 years to complete the viewing. It is one of the biggest art collections in the world.

One day, a Russian supervisor called us into one of the lecture rooms – we had no idea why. We noticed that one of our colleagues was not among us. We were puzzled. The supervisor then broke the news: the leader of our group, Paul, had passed away. He was found lying prostrate on the floor in

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his room by one of the Russian cleaners who called the supervisors. They concluded that our colleague had committed suicide. We were asked to go and witness the condition in which his body was found.

Some of our female colleagues were overcome by grief and started wailing. We saw that Paul had ripped the wires from the bedside lamp and tied the ends around his wrist. He had then apparently plugged the wires into the mains, switched on the current and electrocuted himself. Next to his motionless body was a note with the scrawled words: 'Good riddance to bad rubbish.' It was an appalling spectacle and an enigmatic note.

Later on we assembled in the lecture room and tried to reflect on the incident. We all tried to look back and assess if there had been tell-tale signs that we might have missed in Paul's behaviour or utterances. We could recall nothing. Paul was a Coloured person, according to South Africa's race classification, while the rest of us were Africans. But there was no basis for thinking that he might have felt discriminated against. He was a very good leader, considerate, softly spoken and intelligent, and we all liked and respected him. We could not understand where things had gone wrong.

The incident negatively affected the morale of the group for some time; we felt we had missed the danger signs. For a few days, there was a numbness in how we related to one another. However, we slowly got out of the sombre mood and reasserted our free spirits. We complemented each other: we seemed to have the right mix of characters that kept the group in a positive mood.

In our group, there was a character called Tilly (real name Isaac Kekana) who seemed to run on Duracell batteries. He talked to no end and had a great ability to laugh at his own jokes. He had a very high-pitched voice and laughed with the same high note. Mavis Nhlapo (real name Thandi Ndlovu) complemented Tilly like a hand in a glove. Ndlovu also enjoyed talking and laughing with ecstatic abandonment. She would tilt her head backwards, open her mouth wide and emit pearls of laughter from deep down. Her guffaws reverberated throughout the building. She later qualified as a medical doctor at the University of Zambia; in liberated South Africa, she went into business and became a successful property developer. There was Pauline or Olga (real name Xoliswa Nomatamsanqa Ngwevela) who later became South Africa's High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago. She was the serious madam of the group. She eschewed all youthful extravagance and was very conscious of how she looked and behaved. Her laughter was controlled as though her teeth were not meant for public viewing.

Bryce Motsamai or Jimmy (real surname Njongwe) was the mischief-maker among us, but nobody suspected him of that because he presented the façade of a quiet, shy person. However, if a secret prank was played on someone, Bryce was likely to be the culprit. He would sit aloof, laughing quietly inside, while we tried to track down the guilty party. Njongwe was killed by apartheid forces in a skirmish in the King William's Town area in the early 1980s. Lindiwe or Shelly (real name Claudine Ramosepele) was the 'lady' of the group who later became South African Ambassador to Switzerland. She spoke in a delicate soprano voice, an extension of her slender and delicately feminine body. There was also a woman we called Baby or Oriah, who spoke in a tiny, hoarse voice. She had a small upper and a large lower body, the shape of many African women. She had a way of asking the most puzzling questions in class that would leave both the lecturer and the class perplexed. Two men called Gazelle and Maqhawe completed the list. The latter sported a small goatee that he used to good effect in arguments. He brushed it when he was in a pensive mood, contemplating the next salvo he planned to unleash against his opponent. He effortlessly rolled out erudite English words in his soft voice.

We later heard from the ANC headquarters in Lusaka that Paul was thought to have been overcome by guilt while at our school. The investigation seemed to suggest that he could have been a member of a small contingent sent by the apartheid security forces to infiltrate the ANC and MK. Political training in Moscow, plus the overwhelmingly positive and optimistic mood in our group, might have contributed to pricking what was left of his political conscience. He might have found it difficult to continue to face the future knowing that he had been sent to work against everything that the ANC, MK, our Soviet instructors and our group stood for. The extra responsibility he was given of leading the group might have made the burden of guilt even more unbearable. If the assessment from HQ was correct, his suicide note seemed a fitting epitaph.

Towards the end of October 1978, we got news that the leadership of the ANC was going to visit us at the school. We had no idea who was coming. For security reasons, all information was released to us in small doses and only at the appropriate time. The intelligence principle of 'need to know' was very much part of our life. We were asked to assemble in the school director's boardroom. The choice of venue signified the calibre of leadership that was coming.

The president of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, led the delegation. There were

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four other leaders: MK commander Joe Modise, MK chief of staff Joe Slovo, commissar and deputy MK commander Chris Hani, and ANC secretary general Alfred Nzo. Tambo was the first to address us. He told us that they were on their way from Vietnam, where they had gone to draw lessons from that country's struggle against American imperialism. He told us that there were lessons to be learned from that war that the leadership believed were important in the conduct of our struggle. He said the ANC had lost the required synergy between political and military aspects of the struggle by over-emphasising the gun at the expense of political mobilisation. Vietnam reminded them that a guerrilla fighter was a fish and the people the water. He said that the ANC had neglected to build its base among the people; MK cadres were isolated inside the country, and it was easy for the enemy to single them out and eliminate them. The MK cadres needed to merge into the people, and that could only be done through political work. He asked Slovo to elaborate.

Slovo expanded on the concept of a people's war and its protracted nature. He pointed out that our political training at the school was a good start in addressing the weaknesses in the conduct of the struggle. He underlined the importance of mass mobilisation, agitation and the formation of political cells in mass organisations including trade unions, student bodies, teacher organisations, civic structures, and media organisations. He extended the analogy and underlined the importance of work among enemy formations such as the army and police. He also outlined the theory of a united front – we had to work towards establishing broad alliances of mass democratic organisations against apartheid. Finally, he underscored the importance of continued international mobilisation.

Modise added that what Tambo and Slovo had spoken of could not be done by remote control. He stressed the need for senior and well-trained cadres like us to go to the front and into the country and organise among the masses.

In his concluding remarks, Tambo told us that he hoped we could clearly identify our role when we got back to our bases. His parting words made the point that the revolution needed us. We were greatly rejuvenated by the visit and the talk; we were made to believe that the leadership under Tambo considered cadres like us future leaders of the ANC. We grasped the challenge with both hands.

We arrived back at Novo Catengue camp in Angola to the same routine and the same scorching Angolan sun that we had left behind. It was a long

way from the squelching dough of ice under our boots and *shapkas* that made us look like horses. We were also transformed as individuals. We had been exposed to a different world and imbibed a different philosophy of life and culture. It had been an uplifting experience that spurred us to want to learn more, read more and impart that knowledge to those who had not been as fortunate as ourselves.

When I left for the Lenin School, I was already been working full time for the ANC department of intelligence and security (NAT). I was also involved in information and publicity work and the organisation and running of the camp library. On our return, I was roped into political education. Jack Simons, a respected intellectual and activist member of the ANC and the SACP, had replaced Mark Shope as head of political education. In his earlier life, he had completed a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics and gone on to become one of the most popular lecturers at the University of Cape Town. Simons was the author and co-author of several seminal books, including *Class and Colour in South Africa 1850–1950*. With his arrival, the content of political education broadened significantly beyond Shope's focus on trade union struggles. It began to be tailored more directly to analysing our struggle using Marxist tools. Simons died in 1995 in Cape Town.

The routine at the camp was pretty standard. We woke up in the morning, washed in battered zinc baths and went for breakfast. After breakfast, the whole camp assembled in the middle of the yard at 7am, announcements were made and current news was read to us. English was the working language in the camp, but important announcements and news were translated into isiZulu. Simpi Mthobi was the main camp interpreter. We called him 'Gatsha' after Gatsha Buthelezi because he was very good at translating difficult English phrases into simple isiZulu and vice versa. His proficiency in those languages later got him a job at the United Nations radio programme in New York.

Early in March 1979, we received information that the South African Defence Force was planning an air raid on Novo Catengue. There was a story that MK national commissar Andrew Masondo and NAT head Mzwai Piliso had heard a radio broadcast in which South Africa's prime minister, John Vorster, threatened to raid a Swapo camp at Novo Catengue. Swapo, the South West African People's Organisation, was fighting for the liberation of South West Africa (today's Namibia) from apartheid colonialism. The information on the radio was a bit muddled, as Swapo had no camp in Novo Catengue. However, it set alarm bells ringing for the ANC leadership. Cubans

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in Angola were also monitoring the movement of SADF military planes that flew out of South West Africa to other destinations in the region. South Africa had a heavy military presence in South West Africa, and the Cubans soon realised that Novo Catengue was within striking distance of SADF aircraft.

The previous year, on 4 May 1978, the SADF used airborne paratroopers to assault a Swapo camp near the town of Cassinga. Ground forces conducted a mopping-up operation, and more than 600 Namibians, including refugees and women and children, perished in the attack. That added to the alarm bells about Novo Catengue, as Cassinga was not too far from our camp.

The thinking was that an air raid was unlikely to take place under cover of darkness, so the Cuban commanders and instructors developed a new routine for the camp. The first thing that had to stop was the 7am assembly. Then we were split into sections and functional units to go outside the camp and find independent secure shelter. We evacuated the camp every day at around 4am and came back at 7pm. The camp's normal work routine was severely disrupted.

A NAT unit to which I belonged was assigned the responsibility of finding a safe and comfortable place for Jack Simons to stay. We secured a shelter about half a kilometre from the camp under an old railway viaduct that passed into one side of a hillock and came out on the other. It was a secure structure that would withstand bombing from the air. We covered both openings with sandbags.

Every day, we walked Simons to the shelter in the small hours of the morning. His advanced age occasionally necessitated the use of a walking stick. We had to walk in the dark along a dry riverbank in very rugged terrain, which added to the difficulty of taking care of him. What made our task lighter was his unique character: he was a devil-may-care individual who found amusement in every hurdle. He was a free-spirited person who knocked us over with laughter every time we thought we had failed him. He had the rare comical ability to turn hardship into a light-hearted affair and would often find a bizarre gravity in what we thought was a light-hearted comment. He reminded me of Till Eulenspiegel, the jester from German folklore, who was happy going up a hill because he anticipated the ease of going down but was depressed going downhill because he was already contemplating the difficulty of going back up again.

Tambo asked for Simons to be withdrawn from Novo Catengue at the

beginning of March 1979. His political lectures had been suspended because of the disrupted routine in the camp, so he was redundant. The trips in the dark to and from the viaduct were also taking their toll on the old man.

A fortnight after Simons's withdrawal, John Vorster's muddled story became a reality. It happened in the morning of 14 March 1979 at exactly 7 o'clock. There were about 15 of us in our shelter sitting around casually chatting while others were playing chess and cards. Novo Catengue was situated far from civilisation, and at any hour we could hear the howl of hyenas from miles away. On the morning of 14 March, it was not hyenas we heard, it was the heavy drone of approaching bombers.

The sound of aircraft engines kept growing louder; it was clear that they were flying lower than usual. This was the day we had prepared for. We grabbed our machine guns and took positions behind the sand bags that served as parapets. We knew that we were secure from aerial bombardment; what we were mainly concerned about were airborne paratroopers. We imagined a repeat of Cassinga.

We pointed our guns at the blue sky waiting for paratroopers to jump from the aircraft. We were ready to pick them off, one by one. However, all we saw were two approaching jets. They flew over the camp and released a battery of bombs whose loud reverberating sound shook the ground all around the viaduct where we had taken up combat positions. We did not fire our AK-47s, as that would have been a waste of valuable ammunition, and AK-47s are no match for the body armour of jet fighters. We were waiting for paratroopers and ground troops; that confrontation would involve lots of shooting. There were heavier anti-aircraft guns deployed at other locations around the camp; it was their task to take on the bombers.

The droning sound decreased as the aircraft flew away from the camp. The sound of exploding bombs also stopped. It was quiet for a few minutes. We continued to hold our combat positions, thinking that paratroopers or other ground troops might still be part of the offensive. We heard the droning sound of aircraft again: they had made a U-turn and were flying back towards the camp. They dropped more bombs, which created another massive earth tremor. Then they headed towards the Atlantic Ocean.

We noticed that one of the aircraft began to emit black smoke, which we thought was part of an aerial manoeuvre. The paratroopers and ground troops we had expected never materialised. Angolan national radio later reported that one of the two Canberra bombers that had attacked Novo Catengue had crashed in the south of Angola. It had been hit by one of the

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anti-aircraft units in our camp.

Soon we started getting news of the casualties and destruction at our camp. A small group had been cooking inside the camp when the attack happened. They had secure bomb-proof bunkers where they were expected to take cover in case of an air raid, but unfortunately some of them failed to get to the bunkers on time: the bombs killed two MK soldiers, a woman and a man, and one Cuban instructor.

We returned to the camp in the evening. All the structures had been flattened: nothing was left but pulverised rubble. About 400 bombs had been dropped on the camp that morning. It was difficult to imagine the carnage had we not moved out of the camp on time. When the raid took place, more than 500 comrades were stationed at Novo Catengue with about 15 Cuban instructors.

I arrived at what was left of our barracks. The transistor radio and cassette player I had bought in Moscow were smashed to smithereens and the bag with my clothes was torn to pieces. I tried to pull whatever clothes could still be worn from under the rubble.

We were grateful for the timely instruction from the Cubans to split up into small groups and stay away from the camp during the day. Novo Catengue could have been another Cassinga. Some of our commanders complained that the Cubans did not use heat-seeking anti-aircraft missiles during the raid and that only anti-aircraft guns manned by MK soldiers were put to use. Whatever the validity of those claims, we can thank the Cubans that a massacre of monumental proportions was avoided.

There was nothing much to salvage at Novo Catengue. The camp we had painstakingly modelled over two years no longer existed. Mark Shope used to call it 'the University of the South'. It had been an institution of higher learning in the science and art of national liberation; it was now lying in ruins before us. However, the essence of the university was still in existence. The soldiers, the instructors, the institutional knowledge, the collective memory and the commitment to liberate our country remained intact. We had lost three brave comrades and we mourned them deeply. The reality, however, was that the apartheid regime had failed – and had lost a Canberra bomber.

On reflection, it became pretty obvious to us that the apartheid regime had accurate knowledge of the routine in the camp. The punctuality of the raid, exactly at morning assembly time, was no coincidence. Their intelligence was, however, at least two weeks out of date. It was unlikely that

an informer was giving them regular information, otherwise the timing of the raid would not have been so wide of the mark.

We can also assume that they knew the camp routine from MK guerrillas they had captured and tortured. In hindsight, it was short-sighted of our senior commanders to maintain the same camp assembly routine for almost two years. One can only assume that they were lulled into a false sense of security by Novo Catengue's distance from South Africa. They might have thought that the camp was not within striking distance of military aircraft based there and in South West Africa.

We were taken in military trucks to the port of Benguela, where we found a huge naval vessel waiting for us. It took off into the night. We had no idea where we were going; all we knew was that we could not establish another big camp in the south of Angola. There would be no new Novo Catengue. Our military training had drilled us in the discipline of topography, and our rudimentary azimuth training came in handy. We could tell we were sailing north, and that became a point of intense discussion.

As always in such discussions, somebody had to be blamed, and the blame was placed on the leadership. We lamented that we had been kept in Novo Catengue for so long; we counted the months and years that had elapsed since we completed our training. Others complained that they could have been operating in South Africa when the bombing happened and could have retaliated inside the country for the attack. Others argued that the bombing was a victory for the apartheid regime because we were being forced to move even further away from South Africa. Wherever we were going, they said, it was going to be more difficult to reach our country.

The vessel moved deeper into the night. We lost sight of the land and the electric lights of the town of Benguela. Only the moon cast its weak and flickering rays on the dark choppy waters around us. The horizon was no longer discernible. The surroundings were eerie: only the underwater growl of the engines competed with the heavy whooshing sounds of the dark waves. It took us the whole night to reach our destination.

We were taken to a bushy patch of land with a few old, dilapidated, white housing structures and told to do our best to turn the place into a new camp. The rain was coming down in buckets; it was misty and muddy. Military trucks that brought us from the port struggled to get closer to the housing structures where we had to offload. We also had to dig under persistent rain to put up tents. It took us a few days to clear the area and set up enough of them. We also had to dig furrows around the camp to stop water coming into

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the tents. Heavy rains were a feature of the area – the local vegetation said it all. It took us a couple of days to learn that we had established a new base not far from the small town of Quibaxe in Angola's Cuanza Norte province.

I was selected to be one of a group to go for training in intelligence and security in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The training centre was in Potsdam, some 30 kilometres from Berlin. It was a very concentrated course, and we were kept indoors most of the time. Our accommodation was an apartment block where the theoretical classes and tactical training took place. Occasionally, we did practical lessons in counter-intelligence in Berlin. It was always difficult to practise surveillance and concealment in a city where the population consisted entirely of white people. Africans always stood out in the crowds.

The intelligence training in the GDR was markedly superior to similar training I had received in MK. The intelligence tools and analysis were modern and germane to the challenges of the time. We trained using real-life events borrowed from the experiences of intelligence organisations around the world and of liberation movements, including our own. We were taught and had to analyse current intelligence events from daily bulletins of the period. The methodology was refreshing and adapted to the intense and ever-changing contestation of the Cold War.

The ANC, like many other serious national liberation movements of the time, was a willing proxy in the grand espionage battle between East and West. The entire intelligence experience around the world at the time was pertinent to our understanding and, at times, our conditions of struggle.

Markus Wolf was one of the key figures who contributed to a highly rewarding experience for us. The publisher's write-up in Wolf's autobiography, *Memoirs of a Spymaster*, made the following assertion about him:

‘They called him “the man without a face”, a figure of such secrecy that it took almost 20 years before Western intelligence had any idea what he looked like. He was the West's great adversary in the secret war of intelligence, information and advantage. He is Markus Wolf, the greatest spymaster of our century. A shadowy legend throughout the whole Cold War and a continuing mystery – until now.’ (Wolf, Markus, 1998. *Memoirs of a Spymaster*, pp. 280–281. Pimlico Random House)

In the book, Wolf makes the following observation about his experience at Potsdam:

‘We arranged for eight to ten ANC men to be trained in a special department of the Ministry’s Legal College ... in Potsdam, outside Berlin. This college, our invention, was an institution of many uses, all of them connected to the Ministry of State Security. Retired officers ran courses there ranging from basic foreign affairs for new recruits to lessons in countering spies. Under the close attention of a general borrowed from the top ranks of our counter-intelligence department, the ANC learned how to spot potential moles, confuse them, and track them down without giving themselves away. The courses began every three to five months, and the South Africans were fervent students, soaking up all the knowledge we felt we could safely give them on the known methods of their enemy service and the psychology of interrogation. Some basic instruction on the principles of Marxism-Leninism was also included, but our student guests politely made it plain that this was not what they had come for.’ (Ibid.)

There was a marked social and economic difference between the GDR and the Soviet Union. The Germans were more open-minded and Westernised, and their culture and entertainment had much in common with Western countries. Television programmes in our apartment contained a healthy dose of what we knew and could relate to. Sport on TV was more varied than we had experienced in Moscow. We were able to see some Hollywood, British and French films. Apart from ballet and opera, we were occasionally taken to hear live musical performances.

Another remarkable difference was in the quality of the products that the two economies produced. Shoes, a transistor radio, a suit or whatever else I bought in the GDR were of a markedly better quality than I had seen in the Soviet Union. There was also no evidence of destitution, public drunkenness or a basic struggle for survival among the lower classes – at least not in Berlin. In Moscow, we had witnessed lost souls wallowing in the snow completely inebriated. Their shabby attire conveyed the hardship they faced in their daily lives.

I arrived at Viana Transit camp in late 1979, immediately after the GDR training. Viana, just outside Luanda, had a few brick and mortar structures

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but we had to provide more accommodation by setting up tents. The place was big enough for us to clear the bush and lay out a dusty football field. We also set up a small vegetable garden that we all tended as volunteers. The yard had a very fertile and productive orchard of mango trees so we always had an oversupply of mangoes in season. We supplied our residences in town with the fruit we could not consume.

I had a number of severe bouts of malaria during my time there. During one bout of cerebral malaria, I thought I was going to die. I lost kilograms in weight and my eyeballs sank deep into their sockets. I walked like a boy's kite in the wind and lost all appetite. I could hardly breathe. They carried me out of the room and laid me on a mat under a mango tree. The sweltering heat made it even more difficult to breathe. I was feeling sick of myself and the world. My neck began to crook uncontrollably to one side; every time I tried to bring it back to its natural position it swung back. I was disorientated from both the malaria and the injections. I saw apparitions in broad daylight.

As I lay there, big, overripe mangos kept falling and hitting me on the face and chest. I was powerless. I rolled my eyes and looked at the fruit piling up next to me. I could not even swat away the Angolan flies that crawled over my face. Then I stretched out my arm, pulled a mango towards my mouth and started eating without peeling it. I finished the first one and went for another. I must have eaten about six of them before I stopped – I had discovered a healthy appetite for mangoes when I had not been able to eat for days. Viana's mangoes restored my appetite and probably saved my life.

Viana was essentially a transit camp for all sorts of cadres. Some had just completed their training in the camps and were on their way abroad for advanced training; others had done advanced courses abroad and were awaiting further assignments. There were also new recruits who had come through Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Botswana and were on their way to the camps. As a result, we had a constant flow and replacement of personnel.

It was there that I first became part of the management of a camp – I became the commissar and Mpho Sefate (real name Zakhele Thwala) was the commander. The task of the commissar entailed ensuring the healthy political life and wellbeing of the cadres. I had to ensure that there were ongoing political classes that suited the political calibre of the cadres. I had to ensure that there was an adequate and timely collection, analysis and dissemination of news about South Africa and major developments around the world. I was also the head of NAT in the camp, meaning that I had overall

responsibility for intelligence work, a significant part of which was collecting and analysing biographies of new recruits to assess and recommend the form of their future training. It also involved a preliminary evaluation of the bona fides of the recruits based on the biographical information they provided.

The ANC Amandla Cultural Ensemble established its base for rehearsals at Viana. Its leader was legendary jazz trombonist Jonas Gwangwa, the contemporary of great artists and musicians such as Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Abdullah Ibrahim and Letta Mbulu. He had been a trombonist in the musical *King Kong*. The presence of the ensemble in the camp helped sustain the positive mood. What started as a small group in the MK camps went on to become a very popular ensemble that performed on four continents, promoting the cause of struggle in South Africa.

Wherever they went, the ensemble's shows were always booked to capacity. They put together a verse, dance and musical repertoire that was enthralling to all cultures, irrespective of whether the audience understood the language. Female members of the group were the most impressive. Mamonkie (real name Lorraine Mashinini), Julinda and Noluthando performed traditional and gumboot dances like prancing fillies. Mamonkie also blew her saxophone with the grace of a virtuoso performer. Julinda had the rare beauty of a polished emerald and hypnotising eyes of a prehistoric bird. Fortune Ncala (real name Daisy Nompumelelo), Esther and Jennifer had the scintillating voices of nightingales. The ensemble was unfortunate to lose Ndoda Khuze when it was at its peak: he died suddenly after a short illness. Khuze had the most serenading and versatile male tenor that Amandla ever enlisted. Among the males there was also a man called Drum; the melodic rhythm of his guitar came straight out of the tradition of the *kwela* and *marabi* genres.

In 1980, I was transferred to another transit camp in Matola, Maputo. Mpho Sefate and Shingler Rulashe from Viana also joined me there. In Matola, we were assigned exactly the same task of grooming new recruits that we had performed in Viana. Shingler became chief of staff. Apart from serving as commander, Mpho also taught the history of the liberation movement in South Africa and the continent. I focused mainly on the materialist conception of history, using Marxism and Leninism as the basis. As in Viana, I was also the head of NAT.

Other cadres in the command structure were called Ngobese and Bhekimpi. The latter was very good at encouraging new recruits to do physical training. He was also a keen and talented soccer player who helped

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organise a small soccer team. Mpho was also a very skilful player. From time to time, depending on the recruits in transit, we managed to put up a decent soccer team that competed with small clubs in Matola. The old man called Dlokolo was ceremonially the overall supervisor of the camp: his role was that of a father figure.

Matola was a middle-class suburb that was reserved mainly for *mulattos* (people of mixed race) and middle-class Africans before the Frelimo revolution. The houses and yards were big, but since the revolution, many of them had fallen into serious neglect.

The Maputo that I left in late 1976 had not changed much, six years later. The scars of war and the bold proclamations about the revolution were still everywhere: in murals, broken buildings, billboards, on the sides of buses, and in the print and electronic media. The public revolutionary ebullience and gusto that had gripped the atmosphere in 1976 had, somehow, begun to abate. Some of the people were beginning to see weaknesses in Frelimo and the government. For example, soldiers who came back from exile acquired the sarcastic nickname of ‘*dez anos*’ (10 years) among the public. The armed struggle of Frelimo had lasted 10 years, and soldiers who came back from the war demanded preferential access to scarce resources. When such treatment was not provided, they told whoever cared to listen that they had spent 10 years in the bush and deserved to be rewarded. The refrain of ‘*dez anos*’ got under the skin of the ‘*povo*’ (masses) who started referring flippantly and sometimes disparagingly to the soldiers by that phrase. The soldiers did not take kindly to it.

The socialist rhetoric of Frelimo and President Samora Machel was also beginning to wear thin. There were shortages in the shops and not enough jobs, while some civil servants went without pay for months. Mozambicans were familiar with the availability of commodities in neighbouring countries such as South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. The latter had attained political liberation only in 1980. They were beginning to resent their own economic situation. The South African regime also continued to aid counter-revolutionaries who undermined Frelimo’s agenda of rebuilding the country. A number of collaborators with South Africa had been unearthed and some faced the firing squad.

In Matola, we catered for new recruits from South Africa who came through Lesotho and Swaziland. Some came on their own initiative with the aim of joining the ANC and MK or looking for study opportunities through the ANC. It was a great honour for us to initiate new recruits into the

revolutionary perspective of the struggle.

Jackie Selebi was among the people I received. I did not give him a new ANC name because he had been a teacher at schools in Johannesburg townships, including Orlando and Musi High schools, and his name was widely known. He taught many people who joined the ANC after the June 1976 uprisings. Some of the other recruits based in Matola at the time knew him personally. Selebi became national police commissioner in a democratic South Africa.

Selebi's teaching background made him one of the more challenging but interesting students in my classes. The other activists who posed a challenge included Collins Chabane, Rider (real name Pitsi Moloto) and Mandla Langa. Chabane later became a government minister in post-apartheid South Africa and died in a tragic car accident in March 2015. Moloto became an MEC in the Limpopo government. Langa continued to be a writer and novelist of high repute. They all had inquiring minds, and I would sit with them until the small hours of the morning. They were fascinated by Karl Marx's materialist conception of history.

They correctly questioned some of Marx's assumptions. After all, he did not provide us with a comprehensive theory of national development; what he marshalled with formidable arguments was the theory underpinning the development of capitalism on a world scale. Marxist theories of social development are adjusted and refined all the time – Lenin himself tried to refine and make Marx's teachings relevant to the conditions of the Russian Revolution.

Max Weber agreed with Marx that the economic factor, especially a person's relation to the means of production, plays a huge role in determining power relations in society. However, he saw other stratifications that Marx hardly touched on that also affect power relations and the distribution of power. Those include the standing or intellectual gravitas that a person has attained in society – the words of such a person can influence the direction and relations of power. Langa, as a novelist, had a particular passion for the leader and the individual and their potential to impact society and change the course of history. He believed that Marx's materialism ignored the subjective factor in shaping history and society. The *Journal of Classical Sociology* published in May 2010 says that Weber wrote 'in direct response to Marx, who had asserted that all significant stratification in capitalism emerges from its relationship to capital. Writing some decades later, Weber argued that that was not the case, and that despite Marx's

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materialistic logic, social distinctions rooted in honour of a pre-modern era co-exist uneasily and awkwardly with social class as a form of social stratification.

Weber's refinement of Marx is relevant and instructive in societies like ours that have recently emerged from colonialism and race segregation. Apart from race and colonialism, South Africa also faces party political contestation between and within organisations. There are many layers of fragmentation and stratification that influence power relations. Other social levers of power that Weber envisaged include the control of powerful political parties. The person at the helm of such a party might not have the means of production at his or her disposal but might be able to use the power the party gives such a person, or an elite group of people, to drastically leverage and influence power relations.

Such people or individuals wield tremendous power, not because they own diamond mines, banks or factories but because their status enables them to control powerful political institutions and the bureaucracy that shapes the destiny of society and its members. That is why it is possible for individuals or small elites to drag down an entire society into wanton hopelessness, fraud and corruption, or to uplift a nation into optimism, hope and prosperity. I will return to Weber's argument in the epilogue of this book.

At about midnight on the 29 January 1981, I was lying in bed reading a book. My other roommates were already asleep on their mattresses and squares of foam rubber that covered a large part of the floor. I heard a loud explosion tearing through the night followed by another explosion in quick succession. Some of the camp inmates were on guard duty at different corners of the yard. I grabbed my AK-47 and switched off the lamp. I kicked the first comrade I came across. I told him that there was an attack somewhere nearby. I went on to kick others awake.

Some of the recruits in the other rooms had also heard the explosions. I told them that nobody should put on the light. We started crawling through the door to our pre-agreed combat positions. Those on guard duty had also heard the explosions and were combat-ready. I crawled and took a position behind a big tree. I aimed my gun at the street next to our fence. Two military trucks passed in the street. They carried Black soldiers wearing the uniform of Frelimo. With our muzzles pointing at the street, we followed the trucks until they were gone.

We heard further explosions and automatic gunfire. The sound was

becoming more dispersed. We agreed that we needed to keep our combat positions until we could figure out what was happening. Bursts of automatic gunfire continued at intervals. After some time, the sound of gunfire died away. We continued to keep our positions. We suspected that there had been a coup or attempted coup, based on the fact that we had seen Frelimo soldiers passing. We also knew that Frelimo had been infiltrated by the South African security forces and thought apartheid forces might have given their backing to a coup. Later on, we saw a number of trucks, more than the original two, passing some distance away.

Gradually, we assembled in the dark and tried to figure out what had happened. The possibility of a coup backed by South Africa spelt danger for us, and we feared being rounded up and hijacked back to our country. While we were caucusing, the other comrades were trying to call senior comrades in Maputo, while they and comrades in other ANC centres were trying to contact us to find out whether we were safe. That was how we learnt that three separate ANC sites in Matola had been raided almost simultaneously. One belonged to the ANC's Special Operations Unit; the second attack was on the headquarters of the 'Natal machinery', which oversaw MK operations in Natal, and the last attack targeted a house where Sactu was based.

Fifteen comrades were killed: Mduduzi Guma, Lancelot Hadebe, Mandla Daka, Daniel Molokisi, Steven Ngcobo, Vusumzi Ngwema, Thabang Bokolane, Krishna Rabilal, Temba Dimba, William Khanyile, Motso 'Obadi' Mokgabudi (he died in hospital a week later from his wounds), Collin Khumalo, Levinson Mankankaza, and Albert Mahutso. Vuyani Mavuso was kidnapped during the raid and later killed by his captors when he refused to cooperate in the betrayal of his comrades.

The Black Mozambican soldiers we had seen were actually white SADF soldiers who had applied black polish to their hands and faces and were wearing uniforms similar to those of the Frelimo army as camouflage, which is how our comrades at the places that were attacked had been hoodwinked and dropped their guard. They thought the soldiers coming to them were friendly forces paying them an emergency visit.

We asked ourselves why our transit camp had not been attacked, as it held a larger number of people than the three places that were attacked. The trucks passed a stone's throw away from our fence, which was only waist-high. We saw the troops passing, but they paid us no attention. The foot soldiers on the trucks did not seem to know our camp – but surely Pretoria knew. We concluded that we had been spared because most of our people

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were untrained civilians. Besides, not everyone who was there was going to join MK: some of them wanted to pursue their studies. The apartheid regime knew all of those details, as the camp had been in existence for a long time. The security that governed it was also not as strict as that of the Special Operations and the Natal machinery. We housed a few trained personnel but also many people who did not know how to hold a gun.

We were also alive to the reality that the apartheid regime cared very little about the difference between soldiers, would-be soldiers and civilians. They had blurred that divide many times before with wanton impunity.

Two years after the Matola raid, I was invited to the ANC youth conference in Tanzania. I had never been to Tanzania, but I knew that MK had military camps there. I also knew that the ANC had set up what came to be called the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College (Somafo). Having stayed with Kalushi for several months at the Memo transit camp, I was excitedly looking forward to the visit.

I landed at the airport in Dar es Salaam on a very hot day. A relatively new kombi was waiting for me at the airport, a donation by the international solidarity movement.

Following the huge outflow of young people and families from South Africa after the 1976 uprisings, the ANC had to think about how to cater for pre-tertiary education needs. Not everyone wanted to join MK. Even if they wanted to, some people were too young. The ANC wanted to nurture and guide the careers of young people in a responsible manner. They also had to think of a post-apartheid liberated South Africa and the need for varied skills in reconstructing the country.

The kombi had been driving for several hours when it finally entered an impressive complex. I set my eyes on the inscription at the entrance: 'Tell my people that I love them and that they must continue the struggle; my blood will nourish the tree that will bear the fruits of freedom. A luta continua. – Solomon Mahlangu.'

Mahlangu's picture was bold and he was shown in a pensive mood. It was the face of a young man, only 23 years of age, contemplating the vicissitudes of the human condition.

I was overjoyed to see the multidisciplinary and sophisticated establishment. Somafo was built on land that the Tanzanian government donated to the ANC in 1977. Although it started as a small community, with the abundant goodwill of the anti-apartheid solidarity movement across the world, it grew and diversified very rapidly. Kalushi's arrest, trial and the 'stay

of execution' campaign had spurred one of the greatest international campaigns against the South African regime. In my view, it was the most powerful international mobilisation around an individual in the 1970s.

When we assembled for the conference, Somaferco was no longer simply an academic educational institution. It had become a mini-municipality on a patch of land called Mazimbu outside the town of Morogoro. There was a nursery school and a primary, secondary and high school. They had also set up a farm, carpentry school and the Dakawa Arts and Textile Centre. There was a multipurpose library, a sports facility and a clinic. The Mazimbu community had become self-sufficient. The community was teeming with all sorts of nationalities from the international solidarity movement who were involved in all facets of the project. There were teachers, instructors at the carpentry school, farm experts, textile designers and medical practitioners.

The youth conference was meant to create strategies to coordinate the work of the youth in the ANC. Part of that strategy was the mobilisation and coordination of youth and student organisations around the world in support of the anti-apartheid struggle. Since the early 70s, the ANC had neglected to streamline its structures and campaigns in that field. The convening of that conference also demonstrated the influence of the 1976 youth uprisings on the demographics, priorities and the general work of the ANC. Before 1976, the ANC had become thin in terms of the number of young people who were active in exile ranks. The conference included ANC delegates from MK, students, and those employed in different professional institutions around the world.

At the end of the conference, I was voted onto the national executive committee to head political education and culture. That meant that I had to relocate from Maputo to Lusaka in Zambia where the headquarters of the ANC Youth Section (ANCYS) were to be set up. Jackie Selebi became the head of the ANCYS. My new position also meant that I had to be an executive member of the Cultural Section of the ANC, headed by Barbara Masekela.