

6. The Life of a Freedom Fighter

By Sandile Sijake

I was born in the Transkei on 5 October 1945, the second of six children. There were always struggles for the limited land available. My father's elder brother worked as a petrol pump attendant at Bobby Locke garage in Wynberg in Cape Town. Sometimes during summer holidays I spent time with him. He used to visit Comrade Jack Simons' home together with some of his colleagues from Namibia where they had political study classes with the professor. My uncle took me with him; maybe to keep me out of mischief.

In 1959 I joined the ANC in Umtata where the main organisers were Ambrose Makiwane, Greenwood Ngotyane and Mda. We were about 200 student members with Comrade Lengisi as our Secretary and in 1960 I was expelled for participating in burning some school buildings. My father sent me to his brother in Cape Town who had moved from Retreat to Rubusana Street in Langa. There I met Alfred Willie in 1960, the year the ANC was banned. I heard about how the Mau Mau challenged the British in Kenya. We read extracts from *Peking Review* and *Moscow News* that were smuggled into the country. Inside the country the dominant activities were the peasant revolts in Sekhukhuniland, at Zeerust, and in Pondoland. We felt our country was pregnant with seeds of revolution.

The banning of the ANC after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 meant that we operated 'underground' and had to preserve the security of the organisation. Information within the organisation circulated on the basis of the need to know. Members were introduced by code names when their true names were not known to the group. It was

under these circumstances that I met comrade Denis Goldberg, after the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK).

The Western Cape Regional Command of MK organised what has become known as the First MK Training Camp inside South Africa. It took place at Mamre an hour's drive from Cape Town between Christmas and New Year in 1962. There were about 30 young energetic people of different races, African, Coloured and White taking part. These included Chris Hani, Teddy Nqapayi, Cyril Davids, Cardiff Marney, Hennie Ferrus, Alfred Willie, Christopher Mrhabalala and Isaac Rani, to list a few. There I met Comrade Denis who was introduced to us as the Comrade Commandant by Comrade Solwandle 'Looksmart' Ngudle who was known to many of us.

The camp was in fairly open but bushy land with a small stream called Mooi Maak. There were wild fruits like pomegranate and some peaches. So we called it "Emyenzweni," place of plenty, like a Garden of Eden. I was about 18 years old and very excited to be there. We felt the writing was on the wall for the apartheid regime as we were getting ready to learn about using the same weapons of war as the security forces.

Although we knew that the camp was about military training, we spoke about a camp for young people to learn about electricity and telephones and something about motor mechanics. These were the sort of things privileged young people learned about as a normal part of their lives, but we who lived in townships and shanties had little opportunity of knowing these things. I remember that we also learned about first aid and so we gained knowledge about our bodies and our needs if we were to survive. We also understood that if we were to fight then people would be wounded and we needed to know the basics of how to deal with such situations. So our Commandant tried to let us know that war is not a light hearted adventure. It would be about life and death in the struggle to win freedom for our people.

He said that we had to be people who understood what we meant by freedom and had to know how to explain to our people why the ANC and its allies in the Congress Movement had resorted to armed struggle, and why we needed their support and participation. We also had a duplicating (mimeograph) machine at the Camp so we could

learn how to make pamphlets to inform our people about the politics of the ANC. He said that words and ideas were as important as weapons in the fight for freedom. For that reason Comrade Albie Sachs presented lectures on the history of our country and the growth of apartheid oppression. But he also spoke about the history of the resistance to colonial occupation here at home and in other parts of Africa including the Mau Mau movement in Kenya. Comrade Albie described the development of the ANC-led Congress Alliance which included the South African Communist Party and South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU). That led to the story of the massacre at Sharpeville and the determination of our movement to add the armed struggle to the continuing political activity.

It was the first time that I directly interacted with comrades of different races, because at Jack Simons' home it was all Africans including Namibians like Toivo ja Toivo and Hainyeko who were also members of the ANC. Hainyeko became the first Commander in Chief of SWAPO's Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN). I found Comrade Denis a source of great inspiration and we felt like filling the hills and valleys of Mamre with songs of praise.

In Comrade Denis I found that here was a white man who decided to forsake all material, social, psychological and spiritual privileges open to white South Africans. He took a decision not only to be part of the struggle against apartheid but also to swell the ranks of the disadvantaged. This meant his courage to fight all forms of oppression made him the worst enemy of the apartheid system. He could have chosen to play a neutral role, as a fence sitter. It was a singular commitment not only to join the ranks of the oppressed but to train us in the art of warfare aimed at toppling the apartheid regime. I felt I had to learn how best to uphold his values, principles and norms transcending the racial barriers, and embrace all humanity. He was a good narrator. As a story teller he would make a pause to ensure that we grasped what he was reading to us.

It was during one of his narrations that he gave a major boost to our morale when he said that he had seen through the lie in the system of apartheid. He would never identify with the idea that skin colour determined the worth of human beings. He taught us about the

significance of the honour of serving the people of South Africa as a whole which differs from using their trust to abuse some of our people. During those days all sorts of knowledge was kept from us. Most of us had no opportunity to go to school or to learn technical skills through apprenticeships. Military training was closed to Black South Africans and we knew nothing of it.

Comrade Denis sat with us, talked with us as an equal. He joined Comrade Looksmart leading the group in a song “Mkhulu lomsebenzi ufuna amajoni enkululeko” (The task is great it requires soldiers for freedom). And that led us to discuss the idea that people had been prepared to fight for liberty not only in resisting the colonisation of South Africa, but in recent times in Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam and behind the lines of the Nazi occupying armies during World War II in Europe.

We read from Che Guevara’s book, *Guerrilla Warfare*, to learn about the strategy and tactics of such warfare and its dependence on the support of large sections of the people. Comrade Denis stressed that discipline was important because we had to be able to fully rely on each other. Simple duties like taking turns to do the cooking or fetching water for the whole camp had to be done right, and our cleanliness and that of the camp was important for the health of all of us; and also camouflage to ensure that our presence was concealed from any curious eyes.

Comrade Denis and Comrade Looksmart complemented each other very well. In the camp setting Comrade Looksmart invented his own system of parade ground drill making it fun and very African but drawing us together into a unit. We learnt to move silently through bushes and how to cover our tracks dragging a bush behind us to wipe out our footprints.

Comrade Denis made us think about creative ways of using the terrain to support our training needs and base for guerrillas. It was under his supervision and as part of practical training that we cleared an area among a growth of young trees to make our lecture room protected from the hot sun with a cooling breeze blowing through the space. But being young, we also marked out a football field and had a great time together.

We read from Jean Paul Sartre's short story *The Wall* in which a captured resistance fighter against the fascists in Spain breaks down under torture and lets on where his comrade is hiding in a graveyard because he believes that he had left that place. But unknown to him, sickness had prevented him from going. His friend is captured and shot. That we read this story has a sad twist, because Looksmart himself was found in August 1963 by the security police because he was too ill to go to his safe place, and a comrade informed them where he had been. Looksmart was tortured to death.

We talked about Molotov cocktails but what was most important was the need to develop our skills and always to remember that our struggle is a political struggle for freedom; it is not a war for personal power, but a war against racist supremacy, not against whites as such. Our enthusiasm overshadowed any thought of danger; we only saw success in all our future operations because now we were learning about modern forms of fighting.

Each day was filled with enthusiastic activities breaking new ground and experience. Comrade Denis maintained his cool even on the day we were surprised by a police visit. His presence together with Comrade Albie Sachs neutralised the police making them to act in a civil manner. When Comrade Christopher Mhrabalala and I hid in the bush, the police queried the numbers but did not go into the bushes to look for those they believed were missing. That was due to convincing explanations by Comrades Denis and Albie. This incident marked a closure to internal training and it saw the opening of new opportunities to leave for training abroad.

On leaving South Africa early in 1963 I made my way to Tanzania. There we continued with political education at Luthuli Camp, commanded by Comrade Nimrod Sejake. It took time for arrangements to leave Dar es Salaam for military training. In 1964 we were sent to Egypt to a training camp called Sacca about 50 km from Cairo. The rangers course was tough as it was based on working as part of special-forces. I missed continuity with guerrilla training that we started at Mamre because now our training was based on acting as support units to a regular army. But because we did not know about such military activity we participated with great excitement.

The ANC realised that we were not properly trained and sent us to the Soviet Union for further training. We were introduced to Basic Combat Work which involved conduct of information gathering and processing, establishment of Dead Letter Boxes (DLBs), integration of military and political work, political economy and social studies – which built upon the teachings we received at Mamre from Comrade Albie Sachs. We learned how to draw topographic maps of the terrain, map reading, deployment of units, analysis and presentation of enemy deployments on a map, modification of terrain through field engineering – to create obstacles for the enemy or to breach enemy obstacles. We learned about the significance of long marches and night attacks which could make opportunities for obtaining weapons from enemy installations. We gained more insight in the introduction given by Comrade Denis at Mamre on guerrilla warfare and the importance of discipline. We were fortunate because some of our instructors were part of the leadership of the partisans during World War II against the German invasion of the Soviet Union.

After the period in the Soviet Union I felt that I was properly trained as we returned to Kongwa camp in Tanzania in 1966. Kongwa had its challenges and tested our levels of discipline, endurance and commitment as life there was harsh, with little food. A few deserted to Kenya, and some found their way to back to South Africa. We were shocked to find that a few had become part of the apartheid security police who interrogated us after our arrest in 1972. It was not long before the ANC moved some of us to Zambia as a prelude to the Wankie joint ANC/ZAPU Operation in 1967 and Sipolilo Operation in 1968. Comrade Alfred Willie was commander of the fighting detachment during the Wankie Campaign and he with Comrades Castro Dolo, Buqa, James April and Chris Hani were outstanding in all encounters with the Rhodesian Army and some South African police units. I was deployed as part of the reconnaissance group with ZAPU cadres. Our function was to identify a number of safe crossing points along the Zambezi River from Zambia into then Rhodesia.

In 1968 I participated in collecting some of the information (through interviews of some comrades including Comrade Duma Nokwe then Secretary General of the ANC) which we included in

what is now referred to as the Chris Hani Memorandum about the need to intensify the armed struggle. Although the memorandum was not presented to the Conference it did lead to the leadership taking decisive action to intensify the struggle inside South Africa. I also participated in the preparations for the 1969 Morogoro Consultative Conference of the ANC. The Morogoro Consultative Conference was also a healing and reconciliation process because it agreed to pardon those who deserted from Kongwa camp if they were willing to rejoin the ANC.

In late 1969, Zambia and Tanzania requested the ANC to remove all its fighting personnel and leave only office components. In 1970 I was part of the groups that were sent back to the Soviet Union. That journey also led to the preparations for a sea landing along the coast of Pondoland. We trained at Baku on the Caspian Sea and ANC acquired a yacht called Aventura. After the failure of the intended landing with the Aventura which had broken down at sea, the ANC sent us in groups of three from Mogadishu back home in 1972. Comrade Cholo and I met with Comrade Alexander Moumbaris, a French Communist and his pregnant wife at Manzini in Swaziland. They were to help us to cross the border. We crossed in June 1972 and I was arrested on 22 August in the Transkei, and transported to Pretoria where I stood trial with comrades Moumbaris, Cholo, Mpanza, Mthembu and Sean Hosey a young communist from Britain. We joined the comrades on Robben Island after we were sentenced to 15 years in June 1973. Because they were White, Comrades Moumbaris and Hosey joined Comrade Denis at Pretoria Prison. Apartheid extended to the prisons as well.

In time as the internal political campaigns, the underground political activities and our armed actions, together with the international solidarity of people in many countries undermined the apartheid system, it became clear that a negotiated settlement was going to happen. Comrades serving life sentences like Denis and Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Raymond Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi, Andrew Mlangeni and Wilton Mkwayi were released over a period.

My military training and experience from Mamre to the Soviet Union had prepared me to become an officer in the regular army together with officers from the old apartheid forces. That integration into what became the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was a difficult time. It was not easy to be in the same units and barracks as our former enemies. Of those who had been at the Mamre Camp I became a Brigadier and later a Major General and Comrades Alfred Willie, James April, and Teddy Nqapayi also became Generals.

We had travelled a long way from Mamre, through Africa and Eastern Europe and home again to our free South Africa. The concept “comrade” had a special value as a marker of identity of shared commitments to the political, economic, social and cultural emancipation of the People of South Africa as enshrined in the Freedom Charter.

The ANC kept the memories of all the Comrades who fell during the struggle and those incarcerated in apartheid prisons alive in our minds. The veneration of our heroes and leaders included Comrade Denis Goldberg. While on Robben Island we managed to hear of their situation and activities in Pretoria Central through the visits of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

After the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations we organised for the ANC. I worked for a time for the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), training potential presiding officers and observers in preparations for the 1994 national democratic elections.

Some of us in the Western Cape have discussed the importance of reviving the training camp as a heritage site in the Western Cape Province to honour all MK members from the Western Cape. ANC Comrade Dave Pick of Mamre told us that the camp site is part of the land the people of Mamre have claimed to be returned to them under Land Restitution laws. Our heritage site will have to be part of the whole system and any activity on the camp site can only materialise once the land claim has been finalised.

A proper reunion with comrade Denis Goldberg took place in 2008 when we started visiting the Mamre Camp site together with Alfred Willie, Christopher Mrhabalala and Dave Pick to list a few. This was

an important reunion as it led to filming of the area and reviving some disappearing memories of those days when we were trainees. The place has changed from what it looked like more than forty years ago. Most of the bush has gone, the farm houses have disintegrated and the flow of water in the stream has lost its strength. The pomegranate trees are still there but the place where we had our tents has only a few trees still left including the incline where Comrade Denis used to gather us in order to teach us about Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* and about safety and discipline using *The Wall* as part of the training material

The cry "A luta continua" adopted from the liberation struggles in the Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, is as relevant today as it was then for the struggle does continue to realise the goals of the Freedom Charter. I am as politically involved as ever as the President of the ANC Veterans League wanting the veterans to help to uphold the values of our struggle against tendencies to greed and personal enrichment. Many of those who were at the Mamre Training Camp served with distinction in MK and later as political activists. Our grounding in the values of the struggle was very thorough.

I felt bad when I could not attend Comrade Denis's 80th birthday party because I had to attend a pre-arranged ANC NEC meeting in Gauteng. However, I was happy to hear from him that he enjoyed the day with many friends and comrades.

One of the striking characteristics of comrade Denis Goldberg, despite his age, is his alertness in keeping up with the demands of young people. On whether apartheid can return to the country again, comrade Denis Goldberg told a group of youths, "apartheid is gone for good, but it remains in the heads of some people. It is the task of the youth to liberate our society from this psychological fetter which hinders social integration."

Major General (retd) Sandile Sijake born 5 October 1945 in Transkei. Joined ANC as a 14 year old in Transkei. Later lived in Langa, Cape Town. Aged 18 participated in The First MK Training Camp inside South Africa. Left to go for training in 1963. Trained in Tanzania, Egypt, Soviet Union. Fought in Wankie Campaign. Later a General in the new South African National Defence Force. Currently Chairperson of ANC Veterans League and member of ANC National Executive Committee.



Alfred Willie, Sandile Sijake, Denis Goldberg at Mamre 2009
Foto Thomas Krehwinkel