

ENOCH MNGUNI

by John Aitchison

Enoch Mnguni died before the end of apartheid. For me that timing of his death has not added to the loss. I have often mourned for a person-thinking, if only, if only South Africa had been a just and democratic society, if only there had been no discrimination, then to what height might he not have risen, what potential might not have been developed. With Enoch I do not feel that loss. Oh, Yes, indeed he might have been 'somebody' in a free South Africa. But to me he was already a fulfilment of what it means to be a human being — and that fullness of humanity he expressed in his struggle against injustice.

I first met him when I was a young Liberal Party member. We were gathered in a mud hut at a place called Swamp — a black spot whose people were forcibly removed in 1978 — and there can have been no more than about 15 people present plus 4 Special Branch policemen who had driven up from Pietermaritzburg. The latter did not have a warrant to attend the meeting. Mnguni suggested in no uncertain terms that they leave. They didn't, but neither did our awareness that here was a man who feared no one. I discovered later that he had already suffered for his political bravery. He had tried to organize a trade union at a bakery in Pietermaritzburg, been fired, detained during the 1960 emergency, and was never allowed back into Pietermaritzburg as a migrant worker. He lived out the remaining years of his life as a tenant smallholder at the black spot called Stepmore which is a few miles along the road from Himeville.

He may not have been able to continue to organize workers in Pietermaritzburg but he set to work with a vengeance organizing Liberal Party branches in the rural areas of Underberg and Impendle. Subsequent to the banning of the African National Congress (of which he had also been a member) and the Pan African Congress, the Liberal Party was the only party that continued to strive for one man one vote and the ending of every facet of apartheid.

The early sixties were a time of economic boom and political cowardice. Government and in particular the Special Branch were engaged in a systematic campaign of harrassment and intimidation. For Enoch Mnguni it meant raids, threats, arrests for trivial pass or poll tax offences just prior to important meetings. In spite of all this the Liberal Party was growing rapidly in the area when he, together with a number of other active members and organizers in Natal were banned. Banning was the then and still fashionable way of destroying political parties and trade unions while still allowing South African diplomats to claim that non-racial political parties had perfect freedom to operate in South Africa. (Later of course came the discovery of 'improper interference' that led to the prohibition of the Liberal Party's right to exist).

I was able to visit Mnguni many years later (I was also banned for a total of ten years). I remember his kraal on the top of a hillside in the foothills of the Drakensberg. It was a good place to be and somehow reflected his sturdy independence. I visited the place again last year. It was deserted, the cattle kraal a mass of weeds, the wattle and daub huts already beginning to deteriorate. From people nearby I learned that he had moved in anticipation that Stepmore was next on the Governments forced removal list. His son, a migrant labourer in Durban, had been stabbed to death. He was sick. Shortly afterwards he was admitted to a TB hospital and died in November 1980. Another victim of apartheid? Yes — but also No. He did not see the end of apartheid (though the person who signed his banning order has already disappeared into a richly deserved obscurity in the Port Elizabeth area). But his spirit breathed the wholeness of humanity that will one day destroy apartheid. I and many others caught a vision of what a world without apartheid could be like. I salute him. He was a man. And to be that in South Africa is a victory. □