

REG SEPTEMBER **LIBERATED AFRICAN**

Founder of the South African Coloured People's Congress

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With **Mellisa Steyn**



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List of Acronyms

AAC: All African Convention

AAM: Anti-Apartheid Movement

ANC: African National Congress

ANC-AN: African National Congress – African Nationalist

ANCYL: African National Congress Youth League

Anti-CAC: Anti-Coloured Advisory Council

Anti-CAD: Anti-Coloured Affairs Department

APDUSA: African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa

APO: African Political Organisation / African Peoples Organisation

ARM: African Resistance Movement

AWB: Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging

BCM: Black Consciousness Movement

CAC: Coloured Advisory Council

CNETU: Council of Non-European Trades Unions

COD: Congress of Democrats

CODESA: Convention for a Democratic South Africa

COP: Congress of the People

COSATU: Congress of South African Trade Unions

CPGB: Communist Party of Great Britain

CPNU: Coloured People's National Union

CPSA: Communist Party of South Africa

DIP: Department of Information and Publicity (ANC)

DP: Democratic Party

FEDSAW: Federation of South African Women

FNETU: Federation of Non-European Trades Unions

FRAC: Franchise Action Committee

HNP: Herstigte Nasionale Party (Reformed National Party)

ICU: Industrial and Commercial Workers Union

ILG: International Leadership Core

ISL: International Socialist League of South Africa

KZN: KwaZulu-Natal

LP: Liberal Party (South Africa)

MDM: Mass Democratic Movement

MK: Umkhonto we Sizwe

NEC: National Executive Committee (of the ANC)

NEUF: Non-European United Front

NEUM: Non-European Unity Movement (aka Unity Movement)

NLL: National Liberation League

NP: National Party

NUDW: National Union of Distributive Workers

OAU: Organisation of African Unity

PAC: Pan Africanist Congress

PNP: Purified National Party

PP: Progressive Party

PRAESA: Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa

SACHED: South African Committee for Higher Education

SACP: South African Communist Party

SACPO: South African Coloured People's Organisation
SACPC: South African Coloured People's Congress
SACTU: South African Congress of Trade Unions
SADF: South African Defence Force
SAIC: South African Indian Congress
SALP: South African Labour Party
SANNC: South African Native National Congress
SATLC: South African Trades and Labour Council
SAP: South African Party
SWAPO: South West African People's Organisation
TLSA: Teachers League of South Africa
UCT: University of Cape Town
UDF: United Democratic Front
UNP: United National Party (See UP)
UP: United Party
USSR: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WPSA: Workers Party of South Africa
WVAC: War Veterans' Action Committee (Torch Commando)

Notes on Terms

The term Khoe is used, rather than Khoi, or Khoikhoi as it is consistent with the Nama-Khoekhoegowab and Kora languages, even though it is simply an academic label translated as “people” whereas there are up to 40 different Khoe communities each with their own indigenous language names.

Similarly, the term San is used as the least problematic of the labels used in academia for the over 25 Southern African communities each with their own indigenous names with the most ancient connections in the territories south of the Zambezi.

When referring to areas of common cause of San and Khoe peoples the acceptable protocol is Khoe – San and not Khoisan or Khoesan which is deemed to be derogatory and reflects the creation of the notion of an inferior race of half-people by the German zoologist, turned ethnographer, Leonard Schultze during the German genocide against !Kung, Nama, and Herero in Namibia. The San peoples also object to being seen as an appendage of the Khoe who have a different history. The San, Khoe and Kalanga peoples are regarded as Foundation Peoples, and those indigenous Africans who continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in the modern era.

The terms “Bantu” and “Nguni” are linguistic terms (also meaning people) used as colonial labels in race-classifications largely for Southern Africans with strong ancestral roots going back to the migratory drifts between 2000 and 800 years ago within and from sub-Saharan Africa. Race-classification airbrushed out the evolution of the Kalanga as a foundation people and the now scientifically proven admixture of San, Khoe, Kalanga and broad diverse Sub-Saharan and Nilotic-Saharan African tributaries in

the peopling of Southern Africa – the cousin connections. Thus, the terms “Bantu” and “Nguni” are used cautiously.

The term Coloured is used, without the cumbersome use of inverted commas or prefixing it with ‘so-called’ in respect to the wishes of Reg September and because this reflects the social reality of Apartheid times and because it is still used, with its context understood, by many today. The nuanced views of Reg September on the term Coloured is explained in this book.

This does not mean that Reg September nor the authors endorse the use of this colonial and Apartheid label for all time. Indeed, we recognise that it is offensive to many and that a number of self-identification terms have subsequently arisen in the post-Apartheid era to express ancestral cultural affinities – San, Khoe, Camissa African and other terms from revived or restorative memory. The time has come to put Apartheid labelling behind us and for us to celebrate our hidden histories and heritage, without necessarily taking on narrow nationalist baggage in doing so. The state particularly, should stop using these painful Apartheid labels so that we may find healing from the crimes against humanity that have been inflicted on us. We know who the poor are, in terms of what the focus for affirmative transformation should be, without the need to pour new wine into old Apartheid wineskins.

Reg cautioned that there should be no denial that there are a distinct people who have strong African foundations but also have multi-continental roots going back to the Cape’s African indigenous communities and to African-Asian peoples who were forcibly enslaved. In addressing the term Coloured, which ought to be addressed in carefully thought manner, we should not succumb to denial of a historical, social, and cultural heritage of a people, just like other African sub-cultures, who faced adversity and rose

above that adversity. As with all other African societies in South Africa, homogeneity is not a defining factor for recognition of the ancestral-cultural heritage experience. Particularly during the time of struggle, using the term Coloured was unavoidable, and using the term so-called was insulting in that it implied that real communities did not exist. Use of the term did not mean that blessing was given to an objectionable label, but cognisance needed to be taken that for millions of people it was the only term to which they were accustomed. This is now changed and thought needs to be given to the fact that different peoples forced under the single-term silo wish to express their ancestral-cultural heritage in different ways.

The broad term Camissa African addresses, racism, colourism, and narrow nationalist terminology and allows people boxed into the Coloured labelling as well as others boxed into the three other 'race-silos' opportunity to express their history, heritage, and sub-identity in an inoffensive and non-self-depreciatory manner as South Africans. At the same time, it allows a host of other ways of self-identification to be expressed through revived San and Khoe names, and revived names of other African societies, as well as African-Asian enslaved community names too. Identity is never something singular because as human beings we collect and discard a plurality of identities throughout our lives. In many ways Reg September was a forward-looking thinker on these matters of labelling and identity which he believed should not be subject to taking short-cuts. Race-classification and a state usage of race and colourist labels needs to be ended as it really is not needed to embrace real transformation for all who suffered disadvantage under Apartheid. We need to be wiser in how we tackle transformation and stop entrenching partitions between people as the ultimate goal is to birth a united South African people who cherish unity and our diversity simultaneously without contradiction.

Foreword and Thanks

This biography of Reginald September, Uncle Reg, is a collaborative effort to celebrate his memory in this the centenary year of his birth. Reg actually worked hard in the evening of his life to write his own biography and thus throughout the book you will find his direct voice noted in italics and making up a substantial part of the text. This comes from his recorded interviews which were transcribed and included in the biography. So, parts of this book are autobiographical. Other parts are based on lots of notes on pieces of paper or on articles that he read, addresses that he made, and instructions on the content, look and feel of the book.

As the primary author it is also based on my 35 years of personal engagement with Reg September as one of my mentors and comrades in the liberation movement covering Botswana, Zambia, London, and South Africa. We specifically worked together on issues pertaining to Coloured communities over all of these years. Melissa Steyn, Reg's companera and spouse not only accompanied me in the writing journey, but also in the composition journey using Reg's personal archive that she has looked after over the years. Furthermore, Melissa wrote the concluding chapter from her cherished and intimate memories of Reg, her husband, the member of Parliament, and community servant.

Collaboration extended further to include the voices of Rev Michael Weeder, former Minister Ronnie Kasrils, the late Stephanie Kemp, Zelda Holtzman, Michael Worsnip, Dr Gonda Perez, and Philip Balie. These are all comrades and friends' perspectives of Reg. Ronnie is a fellow leader who served on many structures with Reg September including as executive leader

in the NEC of the ANC. The others all experienced Reg initially as resistance struggle debriefer or as a “handler” in the underground and then kept up a lifetime friendship. Melissa and I wish to thank you all for your contribution to the book.

We would also like to thank Omar Badsha and South Africa History Online for their contribution in carrying this biography on the SAHO website as a free service to a much broader audience of researchers and the public.

A special thanks to Melanie Steyn, Melissa’s sister for working through many drafts and giving editorial support over the last years. Thanks too to the three readers who went through a much longer manuscript and provided some useful advice so that the shape of the book was more reader-friendly and that we could redact the length of the book by around one third of the original script. In all of this we were able to keep much of Reg September’s own auto-biographical recorded words intact.

Finally, we are most thankful for the gracious funding sponsorship of Athol Williams in the production of this tributary biography. Athol is an outstanding and brave leader in his own right, who has paid a huge price for making a stand at the Zondo Judicial Commission of Inquiry into allegations of state capture, corruption and fraud in the Public Sector including Organs of State - as a whistleblower in the fight against corruption in the ANC, in government and in the business arena in South Africa. We are quite certain that Reg September would have been most proud of a younger generation Camissa African taking such a stand.

Athol expressed his appreciation of this biographical project by saying, *“thank you for allowing me to be part of this effort to sustain the memory of those who fought for our freedom. We live in a time when such memories need to be highlighted so that we not only walk in gratitude to those who paved the way for*

us, but that it inspires us to live with the wisdom, passion, and courage of those before us, to continue a long struggle for complete freedom for all South Africans”.

Athol like so many, including many veterans of the liberation movement who are critical of the delinquency in the professional political arena, is proud of the legacy of struggle, but does not conflate loyalty to ethos and pride in fighting for liberation, with simply defending a hollowed-out and severely tainted brand.

Reg September, loved by so many, encapsulated in the person that he was, the liberation struggle ethos.

Introduction

Home, Heritage, and Rootedness

*Do you miss it?
The neighbour, that friend, that talk, that slang,
the school, that church and choir, that dance?
It's yours and mine.
There is a bitter taste in my mouth,
When I think of what we are denied.
Naught shall comfort me; Naught shall comfort us.
No house, no car, no suit, no plane will comfort me!
I want my home in my street,
with my friends, with my Comrades.
Home, we shout!
Do you want to go home, my brother, my sister?*

– Reginald Kenneth September

'I am September – Reg September,' he said, as he introduced himself as Convenor of the First African National Congress (ANC) Interim Leadership Core for Western Cape in those early days of 1990. He was back in South Africa after Nelson Mandela and others had been released as political prisoners and the ANC and SACP were unbanned. Reg September, sitting alongside Nelson Mandela, had just returned from 28 years of exile, and was meeting many new people as well as the ministers of the last Apartheid government. In his hometown, Reginald September as a founder and

General Secretary of the former South African Coloured People's Congress was to many, the Coloured Nelson Mandela of whom the younger generation had long heard stories but never seen.

Reg or Uncle Reg as many called him, is an iconic veteran figure, who rose from the oppressed communities who were classified as Coloured. From his teenage years in the late 1930s Reg had rose to top leadership, a figure of Mandela and Tambo's stature. He was a humble man, with a very basic formal education, but a fount of wisdom and experience, who had cut his political teeth in the National Liberation League and trades union movement. He was the leading force in establishing the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) in August 1953, inspired by the founding principles of the African People's Organisation (APO) established back in 1902. Reg thought of the SACPO, later renamed as the South African Coloured People's Congress (SACPC) as representing a revived continuity of the APO.

Reg September was also one of the two first pioneering South African black diplomats, along with Vella Pillay when sent to London as a young man in 1952 to begin to lay the foundations for a mission abroad and a solidarity movement. On returning to London in the 1960s, when he was exiled, Reg could not be the ANC's Chief Representative of Mission until the ANC had resolved the issue of whether Coloured people could once more be members of the African National Congress. Up until the mid-1940s Coloured people were allowed to be ANC members and office-bearers but with the advent of the Apartheid era, the ANC closed its doors to Coloured membership. Coloureds suddenly and absurdly began to be labelled as a non-African minority. Membership changed conditionally in 1969, where conditions were that Coloureds qualifying for membership had to be exiled and could not occupy any executive position. Likewise with Indians and

whites. Only in 1985 could Coloured people inside South Africa become ANC members. Also, full membership was opened to Indian and white South Africans, and all regardless of race-labelling could be elected to the ANC executive from 1985. (*Membership to MK and to the SACP was open to all.*)

After the Morogoro Conference of 1969 in Tanzania resolved the question of membership being open to all who were forced to leave South Africa because of political opposition, with the caveat of barring minorities from holding executive positions, the ANC once more reverted to the practice up to the 1940s which had no bar on Coloured membership. OR Tambo, then in 1969 appointed Reg September as ANC Chief Representative in London for the ANC Mission to Western Europe. Reg had succeeded Mazisi Kunene as Chief Representative alongside whom he had been working as deputy from the SACPC to build on the initiatives that Reg had already set in motion in the 1950s. Through his pioneering work in 1952 – 1953 in starting the Solidarity Committee for a Democratic South Africa (SCDSA) in London, together with Vella Pillay, they had accomplished a historical first. Reg, from humble working-class roots thus was one of the two founding fathers of black South African diplomacy in Europe post World War 2.

Reg cut a fine and distinguished figure, with his receding grey hairline, above average height, an open friendly face, and a disarming smile. He was a man who cherished his Indigene African and Cape slavery heritage and spent his life building an African consciousness within Coloured communities. He consistently argued that the best interests of Coloured and Khoe and San communities were served by engaging in united action with all other Africans for liberation.

Many different labels were used by colonialism for what Reg September sometimes called Africans of creole heritage – terms ranging from Coloured, in his lifetime, back to “Free Black” in the earliest days of the Cape Colony. Only three of the many terms were forms of self-identification that were dignified. The earliest was the term “Watermans” or *Lammaqua*, used by the early Khoe Indigene traders of Table Bay and adopted as a term of reference by the Europeans. The next was “*Afrikander*” or African, which was first used by mixed African-Asian enslaved people and Khoe, and the other emerged toward the end of the slave trade – “Liberated Africans”. The latter was a term of self-identification by those the Royal Navy called “Prize Slaves” and brought to the Cape. The navy rescued them from slave-trade ships on the high seas after slavery had been abolished in England. Liberated Africans continued to be brought to the Cape until the 1860s and had to undergo lengthy apprenticeships. One sees evidence of this in baptism records of city churches.

Throughout his life, Reg September was poised between being classified Coloured, by decree of officialdom, and his proud Liberated African heritage. He would often use his name to explain the history of slavery at the Cape and express the pride he had in being rooted in a people who rose above such great adversity to claim liberation.

This book is the Reg September story as told by two of his companions – a once young man whom Reg mentored, Patric Tariq Mellet, and the other, his spouse and soul companion in the evening years of his life, Melissa Steyn. In writing the story as far as is possible we use his own writings and biographical transcripts to allow Reg to speak beyond the grave.

Anyone who met Reg September during those long exile years would recall that there was never a conversation where he would not mention the word ‘HOME’. When he talked of home, Reg did not simply mean a locality

or family dwelling. He meant a community, a spirit, a sense of belonging and an identity. He meant a “*help-makaar*” (help each other) and “*kanala*” (caring/pleasing) society born of many tributaries sharing a common struggle against exploitation and manipulation at the hands of those who believed themselves to be the masters of the universe. By “home” he also meant a connection with his ancestors, his roots, with his soul and with his people.

Reg September had a really strong sense of the past, which informed his present and helped him to navigate the future. He dug deep in coming to understand who he was and allowed it to inform his vision of a future, not just for himself but also for his people.

In his collection of notes and old papers, where he started to write up a format for his biography, he states:

I have no intention of just trying to write history, but I will want to write narratives, to narrate incidences which took place during my life and what informed me, and try to derive lessons from those experiences and events... I trust that I will not dwell too much on my own life.

It's Monday 21 February 2005. Where am I today? In a couple of months' time, I will be 82 years of age. Able to read and write, but knowing that time is not necessarily on my side. I am very much aware of this especially noting that my old friend Joe Slovo's biography had to be published in unfinished form after his having passed away a few years back. And he was not the only one. And I have so many questions which I need to deal with; so many questions to answer. I believe that 'a life unquestioned is not really worth living'. Perhaps the most burning issue is facing what I sometimes jokingly refer to as the "half-caste" community of ours and the need to be part of resolving the present-day challenges of our communities who need to be prepared to bend our backs in furtherance of

what faces us in our country and our continent. Our people have always been so poor; so destitute, and yet so many of us take refuge in our comfort zones.

Reg did not get to write his biography himself, so it became incumbent on us who knew him, learnt from him, and loved him, to capture his story from the many notes that he left us. And to remain true to his will and testament when putting pen to paper and when pouring over what he did write and collect in six boxes of papers, we have brought Reg's own words into this story as much as possible, so that at least in part it is autobiographical. He left enough of his own words for us to do this.

In giving guidance to those who might write about him, Reg suggested that the product not be a 'tome'. This word has a very bland meaning in the English language – a hefty academic publication, a volume; a reference work that is cumbersome, cluttered with citations to navigate and gathers dust.

Interestingly when you go to the Greek and Latin roots of the term "tome" you see a different and almost opposite meaning to the English version. Indeed, it's this opposite meaning that speaks to what we believe Reg meant his biography to be. In the Greek, from which "tome" is derived, it simply meant "slices of life". In elaborating on what he meant, Reg stated:

My story should be accessible to a broad sector of the reading public. And it should present guidance to Coloured communities specifically, and young people in particular. It should present an understanding of how persons from my community responded to the challenge of Apartheid in our time. It should outline the factors that shaped, and informed the consciousness and character of a person such as myself.

The authors, without Reg here to guide us, may not have been able to present the most comprehensive biography of this great man, but we have certainly tried our best to do justice to his life. Our aim has been to also improve the understanding of the motive forces and influences that

propelled Reg’s passionate struggle in response to the legacy of colonialism, the destruction and havoc caused by Apartheid, and its legacy of disintegration of what Reg called “*home*” – the destruction of social cohesion of unique and somewhat unrecognised African communities branded Coloured.

We have taken our cue from his exhortation to outline, as he put it, ‘*the factors that shaped and informed my consciousness,*’ and in so doing presented the ‘*slices of life*’ that defined our dear Uncle Reg. We have also roped in perspectives of Reg from those who worked with him and knew him well.

Interspersed throughout the story will be thoughts that Reg September had on the issues and themes that emerged as a constant over his lifetime. (*Reg’s direct voice is captured throughout in Italics script*) Central to this is how he worked both with and around the controversial term Coloured, believing that until liberation one could not separate the Apartheid branding from the people and then expect to coherently talk of the struggles faced by Coloured communities. He also however said that a more dignified and historically grounded term for those labelled Coloured should emerge from discourse rooted among the people in a post-Apartheid South Africa, as a colourism or race term has no meaning. The indigenous African resistance to colonialism and Apartheid and African-Asian enslavement experience of facing and rising above adversity should shape the expression of self-identity.

And so, in telling this story, we have broken with the writing tradition and presented Reg’s entry into life not just as a story of the birth, childhood and life of an individual, but also as the story of the legacy that he was born into, the legacy which fashioned his life, and his responses to its challenges. It is a legacy of a set of marginalised communities brought together under the brand Coloured that defines not only Reg and his life’s work, but also his cherished understanding of “home”.

Over 35 years, I, Tariq, engaged in many conversations with Reg September from whom I learnt my ABCs when it came to the Coloured role in the political resistance arena. We often engaged in debate and discourse on the subject, and I can attest to Reg's highly nuanced and sensitive approach to our history, heritage and political expression within the broader South African history and political developments. His was also a working class perspective rather than an intelligentsia missive on Coloured people.

I also engaged with Reg's contemporaries, like Dr Richard van der Ross, when he was chairman of the board of an NGO which I co-founded – Inyathelo the South African Institute for Advancement. The chemistry created by these two men, including both their sparring and at times mutual antagonism on some perspectives, taken together with the greater mutual respect they had for each other, was amazing. Though they represented political opposites it was an education for me to see a working class organic intellectual with immense wisdom politically, wrestle with a man who was regarded as an illustrious educationist with a pedigree academic record. Reg was a natural strategist with a truly revolutionary mind whereas Dicky van der Ross, though a great intellectual, followed a course in life that can be called “attempting to extract trickle-down gains” through what Afrikaans-speakers call “toenadering” and the English call “cap in hand” politics.

Melissa Steyn, as Reg's companion and wife, enjoyed the last two decades with Reg and has provided a very special perspective of Reg as husband, friend, comrade, Member of Parliament, and retired stalwart. Together we have worked in collaboration to bring you Reg's story.

Along with our relating Reg's story and providing perspectives on his life, we have also brought together the perspectives of others in one chapter (*chapter 11*). Many started their relationships with Reg with him in the role

of their underground operative handler in the clandestine side of the resistance to Apartheid.

Reg's life and work involves a few running themes, and it is the communication of these rather than just his biography that will be given thought and expression throughout this book. Each thread of the past will recur throughout the book, and also engage contemporary issues.

In the splintered world of the Cape Town political 'fishbowl', some will naturally raise their eyebrows at Reg's views and others will be adulating. In wanting us to project his perspectives, Reg in no way wanted either to keep old antagonisms alive or encourage an adulation based on past divisions. He simply wanted to provide a window into the past with no holds barred as his perspective on what transpired. He wanted to help people broaden their understanding of what motivated him and, hopefully in doing so, contribute to the legacy of solution-finding for Coloured people in the broader African and South African political landscape. As the authors of this account, we have not sought to edit out controversy, nor opinions that some may find jarring, expressed by Reg at different times of his life about those with whom he differed. We have tried to accurately convey Reg's views. This is part of history, and there are enough published works that elaborate the views of others which differ with that of Reg September. Reg was of the opinion that coming generations can read these differing views and decide for themselves as to what they think of those years of antagonisms, dispute and ructions that dominated in left politics in Cape Town.

In this biography we will draw much from our own engagements with Reg. We will also capture the times through which Reg lived and the mentors who influenced him. In this way we believe that justice will be done to this quiet man, whose voice penetrated and pervaded the political landscape without shouting out loud. This style of biography will be interspersed with

Reg's direct narratives left to us by tape-recordings and transcripts of interviews, papers written and correspondence.

What emerges from Reg's life is his commitment to non-racialism and opposition to racism and any practice that has race, race-theory, and colour as a framework. Then there is his passion involving the building of African Consciousness in Coloured communities and resolving what some refer to as the "Coloured Conundrum" (as part of the "National Question") by developing an understanding that the resolution of these issues lies in restoring the African identity of Coloured people. Furthermore, Reg argued that it is by clarifying and understanding San and Khoe history and heritage together with the other African-creole cultures rooted in the African-Asian slavery system at the Cape that will remove the barriers that separate all African brothers and sisters in South Africa, addressing the mischief of forced separation.

Reg strove for a transformative new system to roll back poverty and realise socialist hegemony in South Africa, not based on crude controls by the state, state-enterprises, and politicians, but through private and public civil partnerships supporting self-help underpinned by a state which facilitates the hegemony of the underclasses. Unlike some in the liberation movement Reg September was unambiguous about the fact that he was a socialist seeking much more than simply removing Apartheid.

Central to this he believed in educating Coloured people and all South Africans about the heritage of the communities from which he sprang, rooted in African-Asian slavery at the Cape and the heritage of the Khoe, San, Gqunukhwebe, Xhosa and other indigenous African groups.

In the political arena he believed that People Power or empowerment should be what democracy means. To this end he believed in building a democracy with a high level of public participation at its core and with such

participation permeating all aspects of policy-making, governance and practice with openness and accountability to the public being central to everything. Reg had a natural aversion to extremist approaches and militarism, narrow-nationalism, tribalism, first-ism and any form of fascist exclusivism, while giving everything of himself to forwarding political education to give guidance on these pitfalls.

In the latter part of his public political life, he further took an interest in and explored building environmental consciousness to ensure sustainable futures for people and planet, and to put these before profit, using selflessness, honesty, and integrity at all times in an exemplary manner. He also took a firm stand against sexism and gender-based violence and for women's rights. The violations of rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and intersex people; the rights of people with disabilities, and those wrestling with mental health issues; the violation of the rights of the indigent, the homeless and jobless and that of all other marginalised people were all issues that he tirelessly championed for redress.

In a questionnaire which Reg completed while still a member of Parliament, and in the many documents that he left us, as well as in his communications with family, friends, and comrades, he made clear that the struggle for justice in all of these issues was his legacy and contribution to his people. It is this comprehensive approach to social and economic justice and not simply an anti-Apartheid struggle which jumps out loud and clear through every action in the story of his life – a story of a committed socialist and liberationist.

Reg had an acute sense of what his surname – September – represented, and it was a constant reminder of his roots. September was one of the calendar names that were given to the enslaved, and Reginald Kenneth September, born on 13 June 1923, was very proud of the fact that he came

from an ancestral heritage of craftsmanship, creativity and innovation that characterised his enslaved forbears, who built the city of Cape Town, the towns, and farms of the Cape. He was proud of their endurance, resilience under pressure and their ability to rise up above adversity.

Reg did not see the enslaved as just being down at heel and cowed by their miserable conditions. He knew the history of those among the enslaved who first pioneered education, building, craftsmanship, farming, chemistry, writing, philanthropy and so much more that is so often falsely presented as having only been introduced by colonials.

His life story is a testament to his own lifelong resilience, endurance and rising up above adversity, which can be characterised by that statement of his close comrade and friend, Nelson Mandela, who said, ‘The struggle is my life.’

The calibre of Reg September as a humble servant leader was no less than that of Nelson Mandela, O R Tambo, Ahmed Kathrada, Robert Sobukwe, Lillian Ngoyi, Walter Sisulu, Ruth Mompati, Steve Biko, Chris Hani, and such others of this stature. Because he studiously avoided the limelight it should by no means be concluded that he was not one of the top leaders in the struggle. It was no accident that he was among those in Nelson Mandela’s interim leadership core in 1990.

Reginald September also followed in the footsteps of a long line of the enslaved and indigenes who revolted in struggles against the slavery system and colonialism – leaders such as the slave leader Louis van Mauritius who led 326 slaves in the largest ever armed uprising of enslaved and Khoe apprenticed labourers in Cape Town in 1808. Like Louis van Mauritius, who was tried in the biggest ever Treason Trial in 1808, Reg September was one of the accused in the country’s second biggest Treason Trial in 1956. As much as Reg celebrated his forebears who were enslaved, he also celebrated

his Khoe, San, Gqunukhwebe and other Southern African Indigene forebears. He had a strong sense of his African roots and the complexity of all of his roots, including an element of non-conformist European ancestry in the mix.

Reg learned how to work with the decreed colonial and Apartheid brand “Coloured” and indeed as circumstances dictated, he navigated a range of equally difficult substitutes – “Bruin”, “Gham”, “African-Creole”, “Half-caste”, “Minority”, “Non-European”, “non-African Minority”, “Blacks in General” and so on. He also found humorous and tongue-in-cheek ways of using this terminology to provide lessons. Tactically he often had to hold back from argument when narrow-nativists used the phrase “non-African minority” referring to those that Apartheid labelled Coloured. But he would always find simple but effective ways to disarm such expressions through explaining his own African consciousness and identity through story-telling. He found ways, for the sake of unity, to deal with contradictions without making a hullabaloo as he saw it.

Like everyone else in his community he struggled with finding a single term to give character to his community and in practice used the official term Coloured that had become the commonly used norm. This wasn’t an endorsement or acceptance of the term, but rather it was based on practicality. He further pleaded, *‘Please just don’t call me SO-CALLED’*, for this expression suggested that he and his people did not exist. He was always encouraged that some were exploring a more dignified terminology for the sub-culture of the *‘creole African community from which he sprung’* (his own expression). He emphasised that showing leadership was not just about expressing what one was against, but clearly giving a lead in what one supported. In a post-Apartheid South Africa Reg’s exploration and engagement in discourse with others fostered a gradual emergence of the

restoration of the names of San, Cape Khoe, Nama, Korana, Griqua as well as the possibility of the embracing of the name Camissa Africans for those who embraced their African-Asian enslaved ancestors and their Khoe and other local African ancestral-cultural heritage, along with the admixture of some Eurasian and European ancestors. This approach made much more sense than a term like Coloured which said nothing about the heritage of the people so-named.

Reg was proud of his sub-culture and not afraid to express what this meant to him. He was proud of what he called being “mixed” or having multi-continental ancestral heritage tributaries. This, he felt, made him no less an African than any of his fellow African brothers and sisters. Until such time as an African-pride and consciousness developed among Coloured people, and they could express a preference for a term that captured their sub-cultural heritage as Africans in a more dignified manner, he chose to use the adverse brand Coloured as a practical means to convey an understanding of the Coloured experience. The word demonstrated the survival of a form of oppression and manipulation by the racist regime.

Reg elaborates on this as follows:

I am a Coloured and at times I jokingly (tongue in cheek) refer to myself as being a half-caste, and at other times I jokingly refer to myself as Gham. I do this as a way of emphasising that I am of mixed ancestral and cultural origins. Believing as I do that there is no such creation as ‘pure-bred’ persons, clans, or nations. It is a myth perpetuated by those who pushed division. I see myself as an African with a mixed ancestral-cultural heritage and would dearly like to find a dignified way of expressing this.

Reg, who often used words provocatively to convey a lesson such as saying ‘Us Gham’, once asked me where I thought the term “Gham” came from, and when I explained its history, he was enthralled by how close one

of its meanings was to an aspect of history wherein we could express great pride. On the negative side, “*Gham*” as used by white people in reference to coloured people, referred to the biblical children of the “curse of Ham”. This was a twisted version of the biblical story of Noah’s curse on Ham’s children of Canaan, whereby it was argued that they would forever be a servant class. Racists then created a biblical justification for the enslavement of black people, saying that the Canaanites were black. So “*Gham*” for white South Africans were slaves, servants, and their descendants who had the mark of “blackness”.

But I once explained to Reg that on the positive side, the term “*Gham*” is very close to the Khoe term *!Amma* meaning water, and *!Ammaqua* or *Kamesans* (derived from *!Khamis sa*) meaning Water-people, the name by which the first Khoe who established a port service at Table Bay, called themselves. They were settled on the banks of the Camissa River (*!Khamis sa – Sweet Water for All*). The term “*Gham*” is also close to *!Xam*, the original San people of the Cape, wiped out by genocide. This explanation put a twinkle in Reg’s eye. ‘*My word; is that so?*’ he responded. ‘*We must look at this more deeply.*’

The 1960s were particularly difficult for Reg as he found himself in the middle of an almighty fight in the political arena between extreme views on the ultra-left and on the political right. The battle raged around terminology on the one hand and also about the de-Africanisation of Coloured people on the other hand. This fight on two fronts actually left him gravely ill, requiring hospitalisation in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR). He skilfully navigated a middle road by using tactical compromises while he played the long game. For the sake of the struggle, Reg participated in shaping a way forward that did involve tactically accepting for the time being that debate about

terminology was a distraction and should be deferred until liberation had been attained. He also firmly believed that for Coloured people the best approach would be to accept that the leading force in the struggle was the majority of our fellow African brothers and sisters who were worst affected by Apartheid and colonialism from 1948 to the 1990s, – those referred to as Natives, Bantu, or Blacks in Apartheid terminology. He saw this as vital and argued against any separatist-Coloured struggle. Reg would argue that Coloured people must pay attention to building their own African Consciousness and that this would break the artificial barriers of divide and rule.

The nuanced tactical position that Reg took was not an endorsement of colonial and Apartheid labelling for all time, but rather a practical means towards an end. He took this stand regardless of how those on the divisive far-left, as he saw them, criticised him with accusations of tactically accepting the ANC referring to Coloured people as a “non-African minority”, and lumping them together with white and Indian minorities.

An indicator of his deeper feelings, however, is illustrated by this story that Reg related:

I remember very well walking into a meeting in Oliver Tambo's home in London when he was meeting with a group of people whom we referred to as the Gang of Eight. They were narrow ethno-nationalists who called themselves the ANC – AN (African Nationalist). One of them, very shortly after I entered the meeting, spoke about me, and objected to me representing the ANC. He said, 'Well we all know that Reg is not an African'. I stopped him there and I said, 'What are you saying – that I am a Greek or a Portuguese?' The man was very dark, but he turned red and shut up from then onwards. I knew that I could count on OR Tambo's support.

While Reg was well known for his diplomacy and flexibility, for his quiet and thoughtful nature, and for being a unifier, a tactician, and a strategist, he took a very strong line against racism, colourism, and narrow ethno-nationalism. Politically he was a socialist and had been a leading member of the Communist Party since his early working days. Throughout this story of the life of Reg September there are recurring themes, and the issues pertaining to the indivisibility of being both Coloured and African is a constant. This was true even during the era of the ANC referring to Coloured people as a non-African minority, to placate the narrow nationalists. It pained Reg but he adhered to the discipline of taking a united position, seeing it as a temporary inconvenience.

In 2007 Reg September had his DNA genetic testing done to shed light on his ancestral roots. He was part of a pool of 368 people tested by the African Genome Education Institute's "Living History Project" carried out by Professor Himla Soodyall and her team from the University of the Witwatersrand's (Wits) National Health Laboratory. Reg's paternal Y-Chromosome DNA result indicated the J2 Chromosome haplo-group, which is the West Asian, Near Eastern and Middle Eastern marker in the genetic tree. Reg's maternal MTDNA test revealed the M5 Haplogroup which is the South Asian and Southeast Asian branch of the genetic tree, which is also found in East Africa and Madagascar. Read with Reg's genealogy this confirms Reg September's linkage to Eastern slavery, African slavery from East Africa and Madagascar and some European ancestry. This reflects only Reg's father and mother's ancestral roots and does not give us his paternal grandmother's lineage nor his maternal grandfather's lineage, which are likely also to further confirm Reg's African and Asian DNA lines. Unfortunately, Reg did not test for his autosomal DNA, which would show at least 50% of one's spread of genetic influences around the world. Reg's

DNA testing does give some confirmation that his roots did go back to the slave trade in Africans and Asians and that his lifelong emphasis on being proud of having multiple ancestral roots going back to slavery was accurate.

As he grew older Reg expressed an understanding of the community soul with greater clarity. He believed that it was deeply rooted in a past that few today understood, as they had been so denuded of cultural heritage, and there was a huge gap in our psychological landscape, just like the wide, open space of dusty District Six, sans its homes. District Six which was raised to the ground through forced removals under Apartheid is there but not there. (Around 70 000 people were forcibly moved from District Six) We exist but have not paid sufficient attention to the protection of our cultural definition. The plot of land is there, but not the homes.

For Reg the struggle to reconnect within our society with the sense of community and identity and ethos is still very much with us. The need to build African consciousness and to express ourselves as Africans remains a cornerstone of the struggle of Coloured people, now more often finding expression as Camissa African people. This struggle for liberation is a deeply emotional struggle, demanding emotional intelligence which links learning, understanding, and feeling. This biography of Reg September will take you the reader on Reg September's journey along the resistance road that saw him develop positions on all that has been raised in this introduction as the struggle became his life.

1

Roots - the Laatlammertjie of Onderdorp

*Our youth do not know who they are.
In telling my story,
tell them about those from whom I originate.
Do our children now see
how rich and varied heritage can be?
Heritage! Not race! Not ethnic tribe!
Such can be the wealth – of our family or clan.
Be proud my daughter, be proud my son,
for you have every reason to be.
We are not one gem, but of many shades,
we are Creole, locally born, part of Africa's rich soil.*

– **Reginald September**

Reg September in the evening of his life, captured in writing, a memory of his first act of rebellion, the moment of the birth of his political life at a tender age –

“Something cracked within me at about the age of 10, when I walked across the railway crossing at Kenilworth station. A white army officer, who lived nearby, but never stooped to the level of recognising us, was walking in my direction. As we passed each other on opposite sides, I could not resist the temptation and I spat at him.

He immediately strode across the gap and smacked me across the face, whereupon I walked on. This was my real beginning of knowing it was them and us. It was a thoughtless reaction, but a reaction to his authority and superiority. It was a rejection of the master and servant relationship. He represented authority and mine was an act of revulsion.

Of course, I could not report this to my father or indeed anybody else. My father would not have approved my disgraceful behaviour. On hindsight this must have been my baptism as a rebel. I have no doubt about that. On looking back, one recognises just how full of contradictions our lives contained, how isolated too that we were from others. My vision and recall of that time was only put into perspective in my later political life. Beyond our little world my vision was blurred but there was enough to show me that all was not alright.”

At Reg’s 85th birthday celebration the Rev. Michael Weeder drew upon this incident in paying tribute to Reg, before all gathered at Livingstone High School, Claremont. It was a red-letter incident in Reg’s life. Father Michael brought the incident dramatically to life starting with a quote from Ernest Mancoba:

“Ernest Mancoba said, ‘a person who understands where he stands in life and what surrounds him is able to confront or interact, and most importantly is confident and not afraid.’ Uncle Reg your self-belief is the cornerstone of your enabling confidence in people to change and strive to overcome life’s difficulties.”

“If I was to make a movie about Reg September, the opening shot would be this: A man wearing the uniform of an officer in the Union of South Africa Defence Force approaches the railway crossing at Kenilworth Station. The boom-gates lift and allow him access to the mountain side of the railway running from Cape Town to the naval-garrisoned Simonstown.”

“All that is normal and constitutes a good day for him will soon be altered in a most unlikely fashion. He might be vaguely aware of the short-trousered, nine-to-ten-year-old schoolboy, walking towards him from the opposite direction. If he had paid more attention to the lad, he might have recognised him as one of the children who played in the park near his home in Kenilworth.”

“The youngster lived in Second Avenue, the western boundary of a playing field. The officer and the boy who was soon to present himself as his antagonist were in fact neighbours – they lived at opposite ends of the oak-lined park which is still in existence.”

Rev Michael Weeder concluded – “On this day the schoolboy waits on the adult to draw close and then, fiercely spits at him. Reg September recalls that moment with clarity: the retaliatory smack and his determination not to cry. It was in the 1920s and South Africa was a different country from the one it is today. It was also Uncle Reg’s first volley of awakening.”

On a cold wintry morning on the 22 July 1923, Reg was baptised through Methodist rites in the Wesleyan Church of Onderdorp, Wynberg. He was named Reginald Kenneth September, but everyone would call him Reg and the younger generation later affectionately called him Uncle Reg.

Though later a staunch communist, Reg also most definitely carried the mark of his Christian Methodist upbringing with his ethical approach to everything and his gentlemanly manner.

Reg called himself the “*laat lammertjie*” (*a child born several years after their older siblings*). The last born of four siblings, he followed Gwen, Cecil, and Jessie. Gwen was 13 years his senior.

His parents had lived in his father's parental home in Perth Road in Lower Wynberg, known as Onderdorp, and through his hard work as a carpenter in the building industry, Nicholas September saved enough money to buy a home above the railway line in Wellington Road, Wynberg, from Ralph Rifkin, a local Lithuanian businessman. The house had been built on a plot that had originally been part of Petersklip farm, subdivided from Vredenhof, one of the first land grants made by the VOC in the 17th century. It was also noted as a slave-holding estate.

Reg's mother was Florence "Flora" May Schilder, but he unfortunately did not know much about his maternal heritage. Flora was born in Salt River in 1886, and his father Nicholas Marthinus September was born in Retreat, also in 1886. Schilder was a Southern Dutch surname and Reg's way of remembering it was to ask, *'what's a painter called in Dutch? ... that's my mother's name – Schilder!'*

While looking at the documentation to which we had access through the wonderful digital archive held by the Mormon Church in Utah¹, we could track the Schilder family name back to the 1820s. It was a more widespread name among people recorded as "mixed-other" than among Europeans. It was, however, not one of the names in the early 17th century records. The earliest of the Schilders in South Africa, Abraham was born in 1823 married to Sarah Lodewyk Schilder, mother of a Peter Schilder, who married Catherine Meyer, both born in 1860, and they were associated with the Wynberg district. The Meyers trace back to an enslaved woman from India by the name of Catharina van Palicatta. This is one of two possible ancestral trails for Florence Schilder September.

¹ www.familysearch.org

The other possible ancestral link for Florence May Schilder September can be found in the baptismal register of the old St John the Evangelist Church in Cape Town. The church was largely frequented by non-Europeans of mixed origins with connections to seafaring people. This was the seafront church at the time when the seashore was near to Strand Street, and long before landfills to create the Foreshore took place in 1947. Three children were baptised on one day in January of 1850: Elizabeth Caroline Schilder, born in 1843, James Robert Schilder, 1845, and Cornelius Nathaniel Schilder, 1847. Their father was George Adam Schilder and their mother Sophia Schilder.

George Schilder is recorded as being a seaman. Just next to these entries were three entries for “Liberated Africans” also known as “Prize Slaves”, liberated from slaver ships by the Royal Navy, each with their original names – Manalala, Galofsa and Jambora. These records show that “Liberated Africans” were a part of the same congregation as the Schilders. The old St John the Evangelist Church had the most transient of parishioners as this was the waterfront of the time. The church no longer exists, but its register shows strong links to seamen and the enslaved. These are the second oldest Schilder family records that research uncovered. George Schilder may well be Reg September’s maternal great grandfather, and James or Cornelius could be his maternal grandfather.

This exploration of the Schilders illustrates the fact that there is a great mixture of people in the heritage that Reg was always proud to explain, which has strong links to the sea, slavery and what can be called the shoreline frontier. It was this tapestry of roots – the diversity or mix of ancestral origins – that Reg wanted those who would write his story to capture. Studies uncover that there are over 195 different streams of origins to coloured ancestry in South Africa, flowing from seven tributaries, with the dominant

of these being San and Khoe, and African-Asian enslaved people. The new Camissa Museum² at the Castle of Good Hope and its online museum, a project initiated by Reg September with Patric Tariq Mellet, tells the story of the coming together of these 195 streams of origin – the story of Camissa Africans. These many streams of origin are shown to fall under seven tributaries – i) Indigenous Africans; ii) African-Asian enslaved peoples; iii) those called Free Blacks; iv) the Non-conformist Europeans; v) those known as Maroons, Drosters and Orlam; vi) Exiles from the East, refugees and convicted persons; and vii) Indentured labourers, sailors, and other black migrants. This flies in the face of the oft repeated story that coloured people are simply a mix of black and white by way of miscegenation.

Reg emphasised that the English language was dominant in his home. He said that they were what he called '*pukka English-speakers*'. However, the records show that his father's family had actually been mainly Afrikaans speaking. It is likely that the English language came to dominate in his home through Reg's mother. Another influence would have been his father's mother, Susanna Maria Caroline Chapman. Susanna was married to Reg's grandfather, Cornelius Pieter September, who lived from 18 November 1862 to 8 October 1918. He died a few years before Reg was born. The marriage to Susanna Chapman quite possibly marked the beginning of the Septembers' change-over from an Afrikaans-speaking family in the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in Wynberg to an English-speaking family in the Methodist church.

The earliest "mixed-other" Chapman in the records appears in 1824 as Sarah Chapman, a domestic worker recorded as "Masbieker/Kaffir". This Sarah Chapman, an African enslaved women freed in 1834, is likely to be the

² www.camissamuseum.co.za

mother of Susanna Chapman, Reg's paternal grandmother. She is likely to have had a Masbieker father and an enslaved creole or Asian mother.

The Masbiekers were the largest group of enslaved at the Cape from the 1780s onwards and came from the slaver station on Mozambique Island. Most of them were from Mozambique, Madagascar, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Zambia but they also came from as far as the Congo, Tanzania and Kenya. A number also may have been captured in Kwa-Zulu Natal, Limpopo, and Mpumalanga. They were all just called Masbiekers (Mozambiques) and were responsible for introducing the *Ngoma* (drum) and its drumming style, which has become known by the creolised term *Ghoema*, to Cape Town. The other contribution to the *Ghoema* beat is the *Tamboer* drum from Java. The majority of enslaved Mozambiques were taken to Brazil and Venezuela.

Masbieker Beach, now known as Clifton Beach, was where the slaver-ship the *São José Paquet d'Africa* was wrecked on 27 December 1794. It had 512 Masbieker enslaved on board, of whom no fewer than 212 were drowned, while 300 were sold from this beach soon after the wrecking. The Masbieker Africans were largely assimilated into the "mixed-other" category, which became the Coloured category when the 1904 census committee decreed who should fall into this newly coined classification from 1911 onwards. Sarah Chapman's father may well have been among the 300 survivors of that shipwreck.

Continuing to trace the September family line, we see that Reg September's great grandparents were Cornelius Pieter September, 1835 - 1903, and Lydia Aletta Overmeyer, 1838 - 1899. Lydia's parents were Andries and Johanna Overmeyer. In the previous generation, the name had been spelled Obermeyer, and Johanna was the daughter of Johan Philip Obermeyer and Abigail Aletta Greyvenstein, the daughter of a "Free Black",

Sophia Kluysman van der Kaap, and Jacob Greyvenstein, a German. Sophia was the daughter of Christina Janse van der Kaap, who married a German, Andreas Kluijsman. It is likely that this early ancestor, Christina Janse van der Kaap, was a mixed Khoe and Southeast Asian slave. (All whose first name is followed by “Van der Kaap” denotes that they were second or third generation locally born enslaved people). First generation enslaved would have toponyms such as “Van Batavia” or “Van Madagascar” and so on.

Reg September’s great-great grandparents, as recorded on the death notice of his great grandfather, were Cornelius September (circa 1799) and Sarah September (no maiden name given). It is most likely that Cornelius September was a descendant of a slave trafficked through Batavia (Jakarta) in Java, known as September van Batavia³, who was brought to the Cape in about 1747. The enslaved from Batavia and Java in general were not Javanese as the United Dutch East India Company (VoC) forbade the enslavement of Javanese. Thus, the enslaved in Java were either from India, Sri Lanka, Bengal, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam, or they were from some of the communities in Sumatra, Bali, Timor, Sulawesi, or beyond to Formosa, mainland China and Japan.

September van Batavia had a common law relationship with Cornelia Pieterse van der Kaap, a creole or locally born slave of mixed Southeast Asian and indigene Khoe-enslaved ancestry. Cornelia had two sons, Andries and Barends, and one of them may well be Reg’s link to the original September van Batavia. The first names Cornelius and Pieter cascade through the generations, indicating this link to Cornelia Pieterse September. They were recorded as “Hottentot-Basters” (the word “baster” literally means bastard) indicating mixed Khoe and African-Asian enslaved parentage.

³ *Groep Sonder Grense* by H. F. Heese

Reg spent a lot of energy informing youth that there was nothing shameful about having enslaved persons as ancestors and that indeed it was something that one could take pride in. They were after all the skilled craftsmen that built Cape Town and its farms and towns under conditions of great adversity.

Reg had done these explorations of his ancestral, cultural, and genetic heritage so that it could be used to emphasize to coming generations that we all have a story to tell that is rich in many ways. Youth should not simply focus on the label of “slave” nor even just on the condition of “slavery” but instead get to know why it was that the Europeans had to enslave people and appropriate their skills for wealth creation and the creation of colonies in other people’s lands. Reg would say –

We have allowed the Europeans’ world view to become our world view. It is a common argument of the Europeans to say – where would Africa and South Africa be if it was not for the Europeans’ skill and hard work. They shout at us and say, ‘Look what good colonialism has done for you; without the white man Africans would be nothing.’

Without the skills and hard labour of the enslaved who were responsible for building much of the physical and social infrastructure of the Cape Colony – its cities, towns, and farms – the Europeans would not have survived and prospered. But Reg would lament –

“There is nothing in the Cape that pays due credit to our forebears, nor celebrates all that they achieved and contributed under the most adverse conditions known to humanity. Our youth do not know this history. They don’t know that many of the most famous wine-farms were originally started by people of colour – the ancestors of Coloured people. Up until the British arrived it is our ancestors who were the only artisans, and when the first British apprentices came to the Cape it was Coloured artisans that taught them the artisanal trades. Historians

tell us that up to 25% of enslaved brought to the Cape from the East were former artisans on Dutch colonial plantations and factories in the East.”

Reg thus looked beyond just satisfying his own need to understand his roots and what his forbears contributed to the building of South Africa. This is what the roots of the “Laatlammertjie of Onderdorp” was meant to illustrate for the future generations of Camissa Africans. By getting to know from where one came, young people will be better able to navigate their present and future. Coloured is not a “race” it is a cryptic story which must be unravelled to understand our contributions in history.

Here is one of the little pieces of Reg’s creative writing, which conveys the feeling in his heart in language simple enough for the youth to understand, summarising the essence of his message:

The Curse of Race Purity and Race Superiority

*Like the cuckoo bird,
that flies into our nests when it suited them,
and leave as they pleased,
we knew not what they had left behind.*

*Such was the birthplace of many a child,
answering the description of “Coloured”.
Maybe a part San, or part Khoe, or part enslaved, or part Xhosa,
but mixed for sure, and sometimes with that of a white skin –
perhaps Dutch or Portuguese or whatever.
Do our children now see how rich and varied heritage can be?
Heritage! Not race! Not ethnic tribe!
Such can be our commonly shared wealth – our family or clan.*

*Be proud my daughter, be proud my son,
for you have every reason to be.
We are not one gem, but of many shades,
we are Creole, locally born, on Africa's rich soil.
From North to South and East to West
the pure has no special value.
We will not build a nation that way.
We, more than any, must forever bury this curse –
this myth of the pure, the superior,
a belief held among Afrikaner, Zulu, Xhosa, Indian and... ourselves.*

2

Childhood in the September home

Nicholas and Florence September and their children Gwen, Cecil, Jessie, and Reg lived in a semi-detached house in Wellington Road, Wynberg, in Cape Town.

Reg had fond memories of his family. His father was known as “Boy” because of his sporting skills and his mother as Flora, and Reg was proud to say that they were affectionate parents who ensured that the children had a balanced and happy childhood. In fact, though theirs’ was a working-class family, Reg believed that they and the other people in their little Wynberg enclave were privileged in comparison to many others in the broader Coloured community, and especially the homeless living in shanty towns.

When comparing his neighbourhood and home life to those labelled by the state as ‘Natives’ living in locations at the edges of Cape Town and especially to all those living in shanty towns, he could find no other word than ‘privileged’ to describe the comforts that his family enjoyed. Yet at the same time, Reg’s family life was dependent on the work of a labouring artisan, which was quite modest. It is a testament to the honest down-to-earth character of Reg September that he saw his and his family’s modest artisan working-class lives as privileged in comparison to the lives of many other Coloured and Native working-class people.

Nicholas September had left school after Standard Six (Grade 8) and was an artisan carpenter and foreman, and from all accounts an excellent one, but

after a while he went out on his own and became a building contractor. Unfortunately, he was not as good at running a business. Right at the beginning of that enterprise he made a costly blunder when assessing costs and ended up carrying a lot of debt for some time, so that in real terms Reg's family were not as privileged as he thought. Something that really got to Reg was the degree of pretence and snobbishness in the community. If one lived in one locality as opposed to another, or were of lighter complexion, or spoke English rather than Afrikaans, were in a supervisor position or worked in close proximity to white people, that somehow made one a cut above the rest.

It irritated Reg to no end that some in the little Coloured enclave of privilege were among the fairest in complexion and would be, as Reg put it, '*white inclined*' and looked down on the less fortunate in the broader Coloured community. Way back before the term was used in the 21st century, Reg had an understanding of "white-ism" which he associated with those who saw their identity not in terms of ancestral-cultural heritage but rather in the colour white or 'white race'. White-ism or white supremacy had also crossed over into the elite among those called Coloured. Colour of complexion was also projected as race. Some among those classified as Coloured saw this as also being a race and rather absurdly would say "we are pure Coloureds".

Reg said, *'These 'white-inclined' among us knew nothing about those living in locations and often cared nothing for them. There were those that mimicked the prejudices of the white people too.'* It pained Reg that what was just a tendency in those days had under Apartheid grown into such widespread and deep antagonism between large elements of the Coloured community today and those labelled "Black", in the narrow ethnic and peculiarly South African use of the term.

Reg's father was dark of complexion and his mother very fair, as were his siblings. Reg was uncertain what was said on his mother's documentation, but research in primary resources for this book has confirmed that her birth, marriage, and death documents record her as "mixed".

Florence September also left school after Standard Six. She was a gentle, caring, and homely person who kept the home fires burning.

Reg noted that particularly in neighbourhoods like that of Wellington Road, upper Wynberg, there were also those who passed for white, known as "*half-naatjies*" or "*half and halfies*", as Reg would say. In the Americas and Caribbean, they would be referred to as Quadroons.

There were those who were principled and proud of their mixed heritage but many more would turn their back on their own kith and kin and behave worse than even the worst white Afrikaners, because they wanted to prove their "whiteness" to the white community and rid themselves of their own "blackness". Reg lamented the fact that even in his own family there were some who walked away, and they never heard from them again.

The later Apartheid system allowed for applicants to be reclassified and there were peculiar phrases in the legislation that allowed for ambiguity. This ambiguity allowed for grounds of objection by others against someone's classification status, or grounds for appeal by the affected person that they had been incorrectly classified. Part of the ambiguity is found in the *Population Registration Act* and other ambiguities can be found in other Acts of Parliament like the *Group Areas Act*.

Under the *Population Registration Act of 1950*, the Director of Internal Affairs was empowered to classify everyone:

5. (1) Every person whose name is included in the register shall be classified by the Director as a white person, a coloured

person or a native, as the case may be, and every coloured person and every native whose name is so included shall be classified by the Director according to the ethnic or other group to which he belongs.

What the *Population Registration Act* of 1950 said in terms of classification was:

1. (iii) “coloured person” means a person who is not a white person or a native.
- (x) “native” means a person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa.
- (xv) “white person” means a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person.

The Act further allowed for appeals and objections, that could result in re-classification:

11. (1) Any person who considers himself aggrieved by his classification by the Director in terms of section five and any person who has any objection to the classification of any other person in terms of the said section, may at any time object in writing to the Director against that classification.

The ambiguity is glaring in defining a “white person” when it says that a “white person is not a white person when although in appearance is obviously a

white person, but is generally accepted as a coloured person". This left a very big gap for both passing for white or appealing to be classified as Coloured.

Under the *Group Areas Act of 1950*; Section 2 (1) the ambiguity increases.

- (1) For the purposes of this Act there shall be the following groups:
 - (a) A White group in which shall be included a person who in appearance obviously is, or who is generally accepted as a white person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a white person, is generally accepted as a coloured person, or who is in terms of sub-paragraph (ii) of paragraph (b) and (c) or the said paragraphs read with paragraph (d) of this subsection and paragraph (a) of sub-section 2, a member of any other group;
 - (b) A Native group in which shall be included
 - (i) a person who in fact is or is generally accepted as a member of any aboriginal race or tribe of Africa; other than a person who is, in terms of sub-paragraph (ii) of paragraph (c) a member of the Coloured group; and
 - (ii) any women to whichever race, or tribe or class she may belong, between whom a person who is, in terms of sub-paragraph (i); a member of a Native group there exists a marriage or who cohabits with such a person.
 - (c) Coloured group in which shall be included,
 - (i) any person who is not a member of the white group or a native group; and
 - (ii) any women to whichever race, or tribe or class she may belong, between whom a person who is, in terms of sub-

paragraph (i); a member of a Coloured group there exists a marriage or who cohabits with such a person.

Essentially what this says is, if a woman who is White or Black cohabits with or marries a Coloured person or any other non-white person, then she will be a Coloured person. And as with the *Population Registration Act* the *Group Areas Act* as amended repeats that a White person (male or female) is not a White person if he/she is accepted as a Coloured person, and then adds, or if he/she marries or cohabits with a Coloured or any other non-White person.

So, within these “clear as mud” definitions, regardless of appearance one could go to the Internal Affairs department and present one’s case for reclassification. Or someone else could go and report a person whom they accuse of race-masquerading. It was generally believed that nobody in their right mind, given the opportunity to climb up the ladder, would choose to descend the ladder. There was no perception that family ties and a sense of being part of a community would result in some persons passing up the so-called opportunity.

White Internal Affairs officials, who were often poorly educated and semi-literate, would be empowered to decide a person’s race. There was even a subject called “criminology and ethnology” taught in some schools which gave a guide to race classification.

A Race Classification Board was established to examine cases for reclassification. Applicants had to undergo physical tests, and provide *bona fides* in the form of affidavits to prove that they were accepted within the white community if they looked almost white. If their complexion and features did not convince at face value, they had to prove in the same way that they were Coloured.

The pertinence of this to Reg's story was that Reg saw his mother as one of these in-between people.

While Reg was a child this issue had not yet emerged in law in as stark terms as under Apartheid, but it was already being practiced. There were many inter-marriages and many blond haired, blue eyed and pale skinned children who were part of Coloured communities, just as there were also many very dark-skinned children born of relationships and marriages between Coloureds and Natives.

Reg explained that already in 1939, when he turned 16, there was a softer form of the *Group Areas Act* and race classification being peddled in government by R S Stuttaford who was Minister of Internal Affairs: *The Servitude Bill*.

Reg says: '*Stuttaford began to take measures, giving Provincial Councils the right to debar people of colour from living in certain areas and the right to decide on where one could or could not live.*'

All of the basic foundational planks for Apartheid were already being introduced by the United National Party of Jan Smuts during Reg's childhood.

Reg associated the English-speaking within the community with fairness of complexion and said that they had a negative attitude to Afrikaans-speaking people, who were considered lower class. Also, living in enclaves on the white side of town cultivated an antagonistic attitude towards those living on the other side of town – across the railway line. The *Group Areas Act*, when it was implemented, changed some of this, but new exclusive neighbourhoods emerged too, such as the aptly named Fairways.

The railway tracks and highways were often the demarcating line before Apartheid Group Areas came into practice. The point that Reg made continually in his interviews was that –

Separation, segregation, discrimination – Apartheid – was not just about laws and political or ideological parameters. It was something negative that lived in the hearts and minds of people. It has a history and a conditioning. It was also nurtured by the powerful as a tool to divide and control the poor.

Reg kept repeating that these attitudes and behaviours were there in his youth, long before Apartheid. The attitudes and behaviours were not as bad as during Apartheid, but they did raise their heads even then.

Children of coloured families who were fair of complexion and spoke English were often admonished not to entertain or mix with those who had darker complexions and African features, and who spoke Afrikaans. And certainly, relationships that ignored these things were minefield territory. ‘You must always marry upwards and not downward,’ was the motto.

Reg explained that his parents had their own peculiar way of dealing with the fact that his father was dark, and his mother was fair and had European features. When catching the train, so that there would be no fuss and aggravation, Reg said that it was sad, but they accommodated the system. His father went to the non-whites section, and he sent his wife to the whites-section of the train, even though she was as ‘Mixed’ as his father. That way nobody bothered them.

Reg’s mother always made him wear a cap outside in the sun so that he would not go a shade darker. But at the same time, regardless of the little contradictions, Reg said, ‘*My mother had no pretensions of being white.*’ She did, however, maintain contact with those of her sisters that had gone over to play for white, whereas her brother refused to acknowledge them anymore. Flora’s sister and her husband, the Festers, lived on Main Road in Observatory.

But Reg did recall one extreme family situation in their home. His sister Gwen was hosting some white people in their front room, when her father passed by in the passage:

Upon being asked by the visitors who the man was, my sister brazenly told them he was the gardener. On my father's side he had no intention of embarrassing my sister, otherwise he would have just gone into the room to greet the people. Such was the extent to which so many lost their pride daily back in the days preceding the introduction of a harsher period after 1948.

Reg remembered very small snippets of the past and it is from those that we have been able to construct a clearer picture of the years before his birth. But he was much more lucid about his childhood.

Reg looked up to his father, whom he describes as a well-rounded man, excellent at his trade, a skilful fisherman, and a man who excelled in sport. His father was a great cricketer. Reg also tells us that his father did not drink alcohol, nor did he smoke, and the coarsest language he ever used was “darn”. He remembers his father playing cricket and loved to watch his skilful wicket keeping. But the best of his childhood days was accompanying his dad when he went fishing.

Reg mentioned that grandmother, Chapman worked in service (as a domestic worker) at the Labia home for Sir J B Robinson. He remembers her in her old age:

She would sit on the stoep with a stick and watch people passing by, and would call my mother, ‘Florrie, maar kyk hierso’ – you know so on and so forth. There is a Kaaps slang saying in Afrikaans, meaning inquisitive; “Aggie”. She was very aggie; she knew everybody's business and would comment on everything.

The best way of getting to know about Reg September's childhood was to get him speaking and animated. We have been lucky enough to get just a flavour of those childhood days from some speaking Reg did on a tape

recorder. Reg got that sparkle in his eye and whisper of a smile when he allowed himself to drift in time and remember those days:

My father knew this coastline, the immediate coastline, like the back of his hand. He knew exactly where to catch fish, and crayfish. He often rode long distances on his bicycle. For instance, he would ride from Wynberg to Kommetjie, and it was not on the modern-type bicycle. Sometimes I would go with him to watch him fish. His favourite fishing spots were at Kommetjie and at Strandfontein.

My father made his own nets, and his own rods and so on and so forth. I have often wondered where he got that fishing skill from. He was a very proud man. Those former enslaved known as “Free Blacks” were the backbone of what became the fishing communities. The Khoe people too were skilled at fish-trapping in fish-garths constructed with stones at low tide. Then of course later came the Manilas; the exiles from the Spanish oppression in the Philippines. They all settled in Kalk Bay. You know, my great grandfather, also Cornelius like my grandfather, had a few properties in Kalk Bay They were fishermen’s cottages. He had to sell them to pay off his debts after being declared insolvent. So, this fishing thing goes way back in the family.

It must go back to slave times to the first enslaved who was my forebear. These fishing skills and building skills were always a source of his pride. I have a conviction that my father’s pride and bearing come from his father and grandfather and further back to slavery times. Just the way he carried himself and the way that he related confidently to people, tell me that even when my forebears were enslaved, they were confident and skilled and cut a niche for themselves – refusing to be down at heel.

During the period of the selling of people as slaves, our old identity was erased, our names were erased, and our identity was trivialised; a people of unknown origin is how we were labelled. That is where we find the song ‘January, February,

March', sung so flippantly. A Nigerian diplomat once asked me, 'Why not change your name?'. My reply to him was, 'In fact I am proud of it, because I have no slave mentality and am proud to be a survivor who rose up above that adversity.'

It is therefore no surprise that many of our people feel marginalised and take a cover of one sort or another to disguise the past. It's because white domination has entrenched a mentality of saying our origins don't matter and are not supposed to matter. In the Sudan for example, the enslaved were given numbers from one to ten as an identity. In South Africa, we were from January through the rest of the year by the months. To deprive a person of pride is too costly. It is a bill which can never be met.

But I am straying a bit off course now. We were talking about my father being a keen fisherman. I remember being with my dad in Kommetjie on one occasion. He was catching crayfish and being very successful with it too. And then all of a sudden, he stopped and decided to leave, in spite of the fact that there was a hole where he was catching crayfish. I said – What do you want to leave for, Dad? And he said, there are people coming and they will see where the spot is. He believed that there were fishermen and then there were those who tried their hand at fishing, and if fishermen gave away all their secrets, the greedy would plunder and then there would be nothing for the fishermen in the future. My first environmental lesson.

When my father went fishing there was a whole process to be followed. He would first survey the situation and then wade in a bit and cut the bamboo. That's what he called the long stalks of seaweed. When I asked what he had done that for, he would explain that this was where the fish would come and that's where I am going to cast.

My father also brought home an array of other seafood; white mussels for instance, big things, which he knew how to collect. You had to wade into the shallow water and in a twisting turning movement of the feet, go down into the

sand, feel and loosen them with your toes and then bend down and quickly get them out and into your net. He also caught those flat fish. You know, soles. You needed a special expertise to catch it. He would walk into the water, and if he felt something moving under his feet, he would spear it, and up would come a sole. It would be just under the surface of the sand. It took the sole of one's feet to catch a sole. Yes, oh yes. He just sort of pierced it. Put the spear carefully before his toes. He was very skilled.

Later in life "Boy" September became a legend. He did not drive, so his pals, the other fishermen, would always come and pick him up because they knew they would come home with fish.

When Nicholas "Boy" September died he was Life President of the Western Province Angling Association. Reg was very proud of this and said that he had read all about it when he got a look at an article in the Cape Times or Argus while he was in exile.

Another glimpse into Reg's childhood can be gleaned from the same interview he gave when speaking about fishing. This time he talked about food:

My mother cooked very nicely I thought – great wholesome meals. Over the weekend we would have something roasted on the Sunday table. Oh, on a Saturday I know that I had to go to Claremont Main Road to Pintlebury's Butchery and buy a pound and a half of beef sausage, which cost ten-pence ha'penny. That's what we would have on a Saturday. I think that was for lunch, but generally on a Sunday we would have a roast of some sort or another, whether it was chicken, a leg of mutton, or a piece of beef. Then on Monday we would have something made of the leftovers from Sunday. So, Sundays were special.

If anything was still left over on Monday, we would have that on Wednesday. Meals could stretch far in those days. Tuesdays, Thursdays were bredies or curry. Bredies were stews, whether its green beans, cabbage, pumpkin, or tomato.

Wednesday would be the leftovers from Monday and Tuesday. Much of the vegetables came from our own garden. We had a good size garden at the back, and we kept a goose and dog. In those days we could also buy vegetables from a greens cart which came around door to door. The same would apply to fish, which was usually a Friday meal. If my dad had not caught any fish, then we would get it from the fish cart. The fishmonger would blow his horn as he went from street to street. My mother was wise to checking out the quality of the fish because my father was always catching fresh fish.

Our family enjoyed eating fish and everything that came out of the sea. My dad's face was something to behold when he got home with the fish he caught. I remember his smile, you know, when my mother reacted – very pleased with his catch, and that he had safely come home. He would look radiantly happy about her reaction. Yes, of course it means a lot when a person appreciates what you've done, because he was a provider. He would go out, always returning with something, and found it very pleasing, to bring back, let's say, a box of peaches – that kind of thing, you know.

My father always had a garden of vegetables. My mother would look after the flowers, but my father would always tend the vegetables. He would be sure that on a Christmas morning he would get potatoes dug up out of the garden – that is one of the things that he always wanted to do. He also always wanted to be certain that he had crystal grapes in the garden for my mother – it was her favourite.

My favourite dish of my mother's cooking was tomato bredie. I still like it today. My mother couldn't really do wonders with pumpkin. Now my wife Melissa, she knows how to make a good pumpkin dish. My mother was a diligent cook. She was very diligent and careful with money. She was careful how she bought and cooked and made food stretch a long way. She counted the pennies very carefully. She had to, in fact. In the building trade you are paid

comparatively well when you work, but it is a dicey sort of an occupation, because in winter you are often laid off or don't get contracts when it's raining if you do outside work. You are fortunate if the roof is on, and you are able to do work inside the building. If plastering had been completed, you could work inside the building. Often in winter you and the family would go for months without earning. That was a common problem then.

Sometimes I would accompany my father when he had his own building business. It would be an adventure. I will always remember the best occasion when I went with him when he was doing a job in Froggy Pond out Seaforth way. He had put up a tent and we lived there and slept there until he had finished. I was about 10 years old, and my older brother Cecil was working there too.

There were other things that Reg recalled. Some with sadness and others recalled with joy. For instance, Reg recalled the wonderful camping trips to Soetwater near Kommetjie that they went on. It would be a big end of year family affair when they would all be taken, with others, in a lorry. Tents would be pitched, and they would stay for up to ten glorious days.

My father would go out in the dark of early morning or night armed with his rod, tackle, and gun. I would get up early in the morning, go and stand on the hill, looking out for him. And there he would come back with his rod in his one hand together with the fish hanging at his side, and his gun in the other hand, with a bird or two hanging on his other side. He came home with the bounty. That was my dad.

My father would cook what he called crawfish in a big tin; and it wouldn't be those small kreef (crayfish) that you get today. They were big crawfish. He would steam them and then put them over the fire.

Those were some of the good times. But there also was great sadness in some of his family memories of childhood.

My eldest sister, Gwen, bless her soul, served as a maid in an upper-class white home, where the white fellow who she later married was the chauffeur. I shall not forget that house because it had a full-size elevator in it. It was quite noticeable, the extent to which so much of the lifestyle and attitudes of those household of one's employers, coloured the attitudes of those who served in them. She worked for the Crockford family.

Gwen was a tragic case in our family. She turned to the bottle and was unfortunately addicted to liquor. This happened outside our family environment. She got involved with white Afrikaner people and developed a problem with colour. She married a white Afrikaner chap, by the name of Joubert. Remember she was much older than me. Joubert was initially a chauffeur and later a bus conductor. He was also an amateur boxer. The marriage didn't last. She subsequently married a fellow by the name of Dove from Salt River. They were furniture removers; white or supposedly a white family... that sort of thing. He was in the army. I remember that they had two kids, two boys. She acquainted herself with real right wing type whites. That's the story of my own sister; daughter of my black skinned father and light skinned mother, both of whom were documented as 'mixed'.

I have some fond memories of Gwen before she got married. She could sing beautifully, kind of like Gracie Fields style. She and Joubert first lived just up the road from us in Second Avenue in little Claremont.

My sister Gwen's life came to a tragic end when after one of her binges at a hotel bar in Wynberg she walked out into the street right into a car. The car threw her about 25 yards or something like that; finished in the prime of her life. She was a young woman full of vigour; absolutely tragic.

Now Reg's family history around religious affiliation is not as clear-cut as Reg remembered it. Likewise, Reg's very firm belief that his family was a pukka English family is not borne out by the records. In Reg's time his family

were devout Methodists, but baptism, marriage and death documentation make it clear that this was a pretty modern move, as was their speaking of English as a family.

In Reg's memory of his childhood, his mother, father, siblings, and their community were as English as they come. But when the family moved to above the railway line in Wynberg when Reg was born, they left another culture back in Onderdorp. The transition in language and church affiliation was probably a gradual one introduced by Grandma Susanna Chapman and mother, Florence Schilder.

Reg September's grandparents, great grandparents and all the uncles and aunts were baptised, married, and buried by Dutch Reformed Church rites, as the actual digitised old documentation and his father's personal documentation reveal. Reg's memories come from long after this transition. He recalls the role of church in his family – particularly after they moved as a family from Wynberg to Harfield, a part of Kenilworth, or little Claremont as many called it. There they attended the Methodist Church in Second Avenue.

We were Methodists. Church was an integral part of the family culture. I was sent to Sunday School on a Sunday afternoon all the way over in Salt River. We would first go to the Church in little Claremont and from there we were taken to Salt River. Harriet Beukman was the name of my Sunday School teacher. My father was some sort of a leader at the church. A deacon or something like that; he certainly played an important part in church life. My father constructed the bell at the Second Avenue Methodist Church.

My mother was also very active in the church. She ran her own stall at the annual church bazaar. R S Stuttford donated a dozen bottles of Oros to her stall and I can recall an occasion when he visited the stall. That's the fellow of Stuttford's Departmental Store fame. He lived in the big house overlooking

Kenilworth on the other side of the line from little Claremont. I could see his house from our side of the railway line when I walked to School in Broad Road Wynberg.

In the church, I could remember a fellow, Mr Poggenpoel, who use to sing in the choir and had a wonderful voice. My Aunty Mariah's husband, Percy Fester, my mother called him, also had a lovely voice. He could really sing, and he used to play the mandolin. Fester was a blacksmith; a big, burly fellow with bent shoulders, round shoulders – a powerful man. A lovely fellow. It was a treat to go to their place in Observatory after church. All of us would sing; most of it hymns of course. These would be very pleasant evenings.

And there was a preacher by the name of Harold Bowlie. I would go to church with my mother and father, and sit between them. When the minister said that he was about to deliver the sermon, my eyes would grow heavy, and I would fall asleep. I would awaken when I heard something like – ‘now we are going to sing hymn number 268’ and my hands would go forward to pick up the hymn book. That was my norm. I liked the hymns. Hark the herald angels sing and Jesu Lover of my Soul and so on.

Our family changed from the church in Kenilworth and later we attended church in Durham Avenue in Salt River where my mother's sister lived. It was a far way to go but my father had a special relationship with a taxi driver by the name of Michael who would take us, or otherwise we went by train. Church was a dressing up affair and a most important part of our lives.

Reg's reminiscences about church and family life criss-crossed his story in the interviews with various interviewers and it emerged that the family actually moved home quite a lot in his childhood, which indicated that while his parents made sure that the children had the best and were protected from the harshness of life, they found it hard to always make ends meet.

Reg often used the phrase '*We had a privileged life*', but it is clear that the income of an artisan builder and the uncertainties of the trade did mean that they struggled economically at times to keep their heads above water. It is to their credit that this burden was kept from Reg, so that he could have a carefree childhood. They were also innovative in how they managed the difficulty when the economy pinched them. They sold their property for a good price and utilised the money wisely to be able to supplement their income, as you will see as the story progresses.

In his reminiscences of Wynberg, Reg recalled his neighbours being the Roberts family, founders of Roberts Undertakers in Wynberg, and the Van Booms, whose son Walter was his best friend at that time. During the research for this book, when going through various digitised death notices, usually signed by doctors or hospital officials, something interestingly humorous appeared. Death notices have lots of interesting information on them, including the occupation of the deceased. On a certain European gentleman's death notice, as occupation, CAPITALIST appeared in a big bold handwriting – and the notice was unusually signed by none other than Reg's undertaker neighbour from Wynberg.

Also in the neighbourhood was a Dr Maken who had risen in life due to the fact that his shoe repairer father had sent him to university. There were also the Van der Ross family and the Reagans. Then of course there was the teacher, Mr Samuels, whom people called 'Kaffir' Samuels, which incensed Reg. He had already understood the derogatory meaning of the word which means 'uncivilised heathen'. Those who derogatorily addressed Mr Samuels as such did so because of his dark complexion and sub-Saharan African features. As a six-year-old, Reg had learnt a lesson from each of his neighbours.

Reg had endless fun with his friend Walter van Boom playing down at the river and venturing to the park in the white area, where there were just two swings reserved for “non-whites”. So, Reg became very aware of segregation and discrimination from an early age during the 1920s and 1930s.

But you may well exclaim, ‘But didn’t Apartheid only come into being after 1948?’

No, it did not, is the short answer. There is great dishonesty in the political history arena. Segregation certainly deepened and the term and ideology of Apartheid with a host of new harsher laws and practices certainly followed after 1948, but segregation practices and laws were in place from the time of the declaration of the Union of South Africa, and before that too in the Cape and Natal Colonies and the two Boer republics. Most of the Apartheid laws were fashioned as early as the 1920s and some even before. The post 1948 era simply intensified and finessed something that was fashioned since the 1910 formation of the Union. Race classification became standard practice from 1911. The actual foundations of Apartheid can be traced right back to the introduction of slavery a year after the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and later to the demands of Adam Tas and Henning Huysen during the time of Governor Willem Adrian van der Stel.

When people talk about Apartheid and discrimination, particularly white people, there is the false notion that this only started when the National Party came to power in 1948 and that the classification laws, land expropriation laws, separate amenities and discrimination was created just by Afrikaans people in the 1950s. The reality is quite different. All of these incrementally first became entrenched particularly during the British colonial period at the Cape. The term British Coloured People of the Cape first entered official colonial authority language in the 1860s. At that time ,it meant all non-Europeans including Xhosa, Thembu, Batswana, BaSotho, Masbiekers,

Kroo, Liberated Africans, San, Cape Khoe, Korana, Nama, Griqua, Malay, Chinese, Indians, and those called Mixed-Other (descendants of African-Asian enslaved with Khoe admixture in the main). Towards the end of the 19th century all persons speaking any of the nine languages associated with the Bantu family of languages began to be called 'Natives' and the rest 'Coloureds'. In 1911 in the Union of South Africa up to 150 different African societies were all reduced to nine linguistic national groups classified as 'Natives', while all other Africans were classed as 'Coloured' with Malays, Chinese, Indians and Griqua ringfenced.

There had been statutory discriminatory laws and practices from the beginning of the Union of South Africa in 1910, with relatively minor differences between white parties on how people of colour were to be robbed of their rights, treated as unequal, and discriminated against. There were laws against Natives, Indians, Chinese and Coloured that were hugely discriminatory and oppressive, passed by Parliament from 1910 onwards. Between 1924 and 1934 there was a precedent for almost every Apartheid law of the 1950s – its legal framework established. Indeed, the United South African National Party of the 1930s to the war years under General Smuts built more separate and unequal laws than the earlier foundations of segregation instituted by the National Party-Labour Party Pact government. One also has to take into account some of the pre-Union of South Africa Laws of the Cape Colony and Boer Republics.

These are just a few of those laws, which provided the platform from which Apartheid evolved: *Franchise and Ballot Act* (1892); *Glen Grey Act* (1894); *Natal Legislative Assembly Bill* (1894); *Transvaal Asiatic Registration Act* (1906); *South Africa Act* (1909); *Mines and Works Act* (1911); *Natives Land Act* (1913); *Natives (Urban Areas) Act* (1923); *Immorality Act* (1927); *Native Administration Act* (1927); *Women's Enfranchisement Act* (1930);

Franchise Laws Amendment Act (1931); Representation of Natives Act (1936); Native Trust and Land Act (1936); Native (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act (1945); and, the Asiatic Land Tenure Act (1946).

A host of other laws were passed allowing for group areas, curtailment of social mixing and marriages between some races and segregation. Each of these had a tremendous impact on everyone recorded as Native, Coloured, Indian, or Chinese.

The rise of Malan's National Party (NP) and the ideology of Apartheid simply saw a "perfection" of laws that already existed and a deepening of separation and discrimination. There has been a lot of papering over the stark realities of the Progressive Party (PP), United (National) Party, South African Party (SAP) and Labour Party (LP) in South Africa's history of discrimination and oppression against people of colour, to make it look as if segregation, Apartheid, and oppressive laws was just the hallmark of the extreme National Party government from 1948 onwards.

Until 1924 the SAP was dominant, under Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, both former Boer Generals. Then an alliance or pact government made up of the NP of the conservative Hertzog, who had split from the SAP, and the Labour Party of Colonel Creswell, took over until 1934.

By 1933 the differences between the NP and the SAP were much less pronounced, so they merged to become the United SA National Party, with just a few old NP members splitting off to form the Purified National Party (PNP). This was the white supremacist political scenario that was in place when Reg was just 10 years old.

The NP-LP Pact government and the USANP government had laid all the foundations for Apartheid and passed many foundational laws for the coming Apartheid era. In 1939 as a result of the Union of South Africa joining the Allies against Nazi Germany, the USANP split up into the

United Party (UP) and the “Herstigige” or Reformed National Party (HNP). Towards the end of the war, the latter formed an alliance with the Afrikaner Party (AP), and became the National Party. In 1948, under D. F. Malan, they won the elections by a slim majority. It was from this party that an ideology called Christian Nationalism was created on the foundations of republican nationalism, entrenching race segregation for the sake of *‘geloof, volk en land’* (religion, the white race, and land) – Apartheid.

Now during those times Coloured people had the vote, but had to vote for a white man and all the white parties competed for the Coloured vote using prejudice and whipping up notions of superiority between different strata or different faiths, and of course using *‘swart gevaar’* – the black danger – to offer protective patronage towards Coloured people, some of whom accepted that patronage. Some years earlier, after the creation of the Union of South Africa, there had also been a qualified franchise for Natives in the Cape Colony, which was taken away.

Up until 1950 there was a legal and non-racial Communist Party and until 1967 a legal and non-racial Liberal Party. The former was banned in 1950 and the latter forced to shut down if it did not become a whites-only party, which they refused to do. So, in 1967 the Liberal Party was forced to disband. In 1959 a tiny split occurred in the United Party opposition where the old early 20th century party of Cecil Rhodes – the Progressive Party (a front for the mining corporates) was relaunched. Contrary to some opinion it was not a Liberal Party, as such already existed. It was a whites-only party in the conservative libertarian mould, supported by the big corporates and mining companies which propagated a non-race-based, but qualified franchise on grounds of property ownership and education. The Progressive Party was generally regarded by black people as a loyal supporter of the white republic, but with a slightly less rigid approach not absolutely based on

colour or race, but more so on the convergence of class and colour among a tiny potential elite.

Some Coloured people fell for the manipulation by the white parties and others did not. Those who came from the indoctrinated and collaborative South-Western Cape “Mission-Hottentot” tradition (*the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape Missions had a more radical liberation-theology tradition*), and many of those in the military - Cape Coloured Auxiliary Corps (*which had a long history going back to the predominantly collaborator-Khoe Commandos under white commanders carried out genocide attacks on the San, Gqunukhwebe and resister Khoe*), those in the civil service, and those conservatives who bought into Cape Malay separatism, tended to be the ones who like sheep were attracted to vote for the more conservative white parties. Others voted for the more “verligte” or enlightened white parties and others simply boycotted the elections.

Reg makes this point: *I love my family, my community, my people very dearly. Yet within this deeply valued relationship, it is necessary to assess the attitudes which prevailed at the time. In some ways these attitudes are even worse among some now in the 21st century. Perhaps we need to prise open what the cause and effect behind what has made them behave in the way they do to be able to understand the depths to which a whole community, good people, were groomed into a mode of acceptance of the role of inferiority. We need to look deeply at how class, colour, and a benefit chain of strata created a mentality among some; the mind-set, which provided the foundations, on which much of a community was prepared for its position in society. As difficult as it may be for our people to accept that there is as yet a need for us to inculcate a sense of pride, this widespread need is inescapable. It is in fact shocking.*

And here Reg was saying too that even the post 1980 period most articulate “Left” in the community, with United Democratic Front (UDF),

ANC or South African Communist Party (SACP) credentials, or Unity Movement and other Left formation credentials, who may have spent time in prison and suffered abuse, could also be found wanting when one looks at behaviours at the micro level of their lives and their relationship to issues of class and colour. For instance, the widespread madam/master-to-servant relationship in the arena of South African domestic service can often barely be separated from our slavery past. Almost as in the Stockholm syndrome some descendants of the former enslaved and subjugated indigene Khoe internalised the pathology of the masters and madams even as they reacted to it. There of course was the further notion of ‘better the devil you know, than the devil you don’t know’ that layed itself out in people’s political choices. Reg would say that we need to be harshly honest with ourselves in defining privilege and collaboration.

Ever mindful of being misunderstood, Reg who employed a deep socialist critique, went on to say: *This should not be seen as a public denigration of those whom I loved and respected, or those who reared me. I plead that they may be seen as victims of a society that cruelly fashioned blind acceptance of inferiority and a false sense of superiority over those who were darker skinned or not European enough in their culture or way of life. The extent to which these prejudices exist to this day is frightening, even among the so-called educated and awakened members of our community.*

Reg here was saying that in being a champion of Coloured people he was proclaiming himself as not buying into “Colouredism” but leading the way for a community to be proud of their heritage, free of racism, ethnicism and bigotry, by fully embracing their Africaness. And to embrace being an African one cannot harbour feelings of superiority or of being a cut above other Africans. One cannot engage in denigrating behaviours. He expressed that class-elitism in South Africa was closely aligned to racism in a society

where the vast majority of black people (as in non-white) were poor. Part of the divide-and-rule system the strategy of the oppressor was to cultivate a black elite as part of a non-racial neo-colonial class, and the end of Apartheid would see this strategy come into its own.

The scenario among middle-class Coloured people in Cape Town was that for years there has been cultivation and grooming for this future. Unless there was a consciousness about indoctrination of neo-colonial thinking and the nurturing of the habits that go with this thinking, it would be a freeway to new forms of conflict. Reg emphasized that "none but ourselves can free our minds and that we should work to free ourselves from mental slavery" as Marcus Garvey once said, and Bob Marley had popularised.

Reg would use a simple example of when middle-class Coloured people employed a "Black" domestic worker or gardener. That person was never given the respect that would allow him to take a lunch break, sit and have a proper lunch inside at the table, with proper utensils. Instead, he would have to sit outside on the ground and eat and drink from a tin plate and tin mug. That person would be seen as being on a station below them and had to know their place. Reg would ask *"but was that not how white people treated Coloured people and why is it less wrong if Coloured privileged middle-classes did the same to those they called "blacks"*.

Reg emphasised that there is a dialectical relationship between being proud of your heritage and who you are in terms of a specific historical and cultural experience, and embracing and practising a bigger unified non-colonial African identity.

Around 1931 the entire September family left Wynberg and moved below the railway line again to Lansdowne. Reg's parents had sold their home and their intention was to spend a while looking to buy a pair of semi-detached houses so they could live in the one, and draw an income from

letting the other one. Thus, they needed cash to be able to “strike while the iron is hot”, so as to say, in being able to buy something quickly that came up for sale. So, they rented in Lansdowne Road as a temporary move. The debt laden family also needed to settle their bad debts accrued by the building business. The older children were also now beginning to look at leaving the nest.

Reg’s childhood experiences of Lansdowne were very hazy. All that he remembered were his good relations with the Chapman family, being entertained by them and eating the sugar-coated sandwiches he loved. His brother ended up marrying one of the Chapman girls, Gladys Chapman. He also talked fondly of a river where his father caught fish. Another thing that Reg recalled was tramping the rail tracks to pick up large lumps of coal that fell off the fuel supply coach behind the locomotive. The Lansdowne experience was a fleeting one for him.

Within six months they moved again, to Second Avenue in the area known as Little Claremont, also now called Harfield Village, next to Kenilworth. It was not the top part of Second Avenue, where predominantly Muslim people lived, nor the part of the Avenue where the very poor lived in a group of about eight houses.

There were also a number of people classified as “Natives” living in Little Claremont, but these people were almost invisible to the Septembers in the 1930s. By 1953 these were the first to be forcibly removed. Many were employed in local hotels, and their families lived in and around the area known as Princess Square, behind the horse-stables. The police regularly made pass-raids on the area and the community did not rise to protest.

Then later the police came for those classified as Coloured. Little Claremont was, in the terminology of the time, referred to as a “Black Spot” on a white landscape. In 1969 Little Claremont or Harfield Village was

finally declared a whites-only area, along with what they referred to as the black spots in Wynberg, Kenilworth and Lansdowne. Fifteen years later 4 260 families had been removed. The area was then gentrified and all traces of the history of people of colour were removed. Owners of colour were not paid out the true values of their properties and in the removals valuable antiques and heirlooms were appropriated by vulture dealers and officials. The new white inhabitants of Harfield Village considered themselves to be liberals regardless of being beneficiaries of the ethnic cleansing of the “Black Spot”. The truth is that not a lot of white people really cared.

Reg said: *Forced removals made many wealthy among the white population. It was a crime against humanity, and it has still not been addressed in terms of restorative justice. Our people were forced to go and live in Hanover Park, Lavender Hill, Bonteheuwel, all of the Cape Flats and even as far as Atlantis and Mitchell's Plain. It is eerie to walk in Harfield Village today. It's a wonder that the whites now living there do not experience the haunting of spooks. And they all claim to be liberal, but are living off the benefits of our people's misery without batting an eyelid.*

We lived somewhere in the middle of Second Avenue where my parents acquired a nice pair of semi-detached houses with a big garden in the front and in the back. My father had a workshop there. We also had a kennel for the dog in the back. My father had also put up a garage next to his workshop for my brother-in-law's car. So, it was a very nice set-up. My father worked hard physically to make this our dream home and a base for his entrepreneurship in the building arena.

Reg recollected that class and religious distinctions were drawn by some in the community, even though at a broader level, Christian and Muslim, Native and Coloured and even poor-White lived in greater proximity and harmony than today, making a degree of one-ness.

Nonetheless, there were many tell-tale signs of the fissures, antagonisms and ‘the cut-above’ mentality, which would be exploited by the later Apartheid ideologues. The Apartheid Regime utilised ‘divide and rule’ tactics against people of colour, just as the entire colonial history shows us, generation after generation.

Reg said: *There were folks who looked down on Muslims, considering them inferior, superstitious, and dirty. There was also some separation of an institutional type. When it came to cricket and football there was a tendency to exclude Muslims from the Cape and District League. These were things ingrained by missionaries and the Christian church. There were people that thought that Muslims were of a different race. The fact of the matter is that we descend from the same enslaved Africans and Asians. Most of the enslaved were not Muslims when they came to the Cape. They got converted here by Muslim resisters to the Dutch in their home countries in the East, forced into exile at the Cape. When these Muslim religious and political leaders were exiled to the Cape, they taught the enslaved about Islam. There is no real distinction between us except for a bit of Arabisation that was part of the package when it came to adopting the new faith.*

Talking about cricket; I used to go down and watch my father play at the Cape and District ground in Rosemead Avenue. It was one of the favourite things that I would like to do. I would go with my dad into the dressing room, and I was sort of like a mascot of the team – the Yorkshires. There was a man by the name of Wilcox. The Wilcox family played a role in later years in the Unity Movement. But their old man remembered me from the cricket days. He was very proud of a picture which he had of me when I was a kiddie, sitting in the front row of the Yorkshire Cricket team. And of course, when I grew up, he met me one day and said, ‘You know I’ve got a picture of you and the team.’ This was much to the

dislike of his family at that time who were our political opponents in the Unity movement in the 1940s and 1950s.

I also remember names and faces of Basil and Ronnie Hendricks, William Herbert, Louis, and George Maurice. These are just some of the people that flash by in my mind when recalling the past.

My father was a little bit of a batsman, but it was at wicket keeping that he excelled. He wasn't afraid of the balls hurtling towards him. He literally had his nose to the wicket. He was so fast. He also told me how a really good wicket keeper could cheat when so near to the wickets. Because he said if your hand was so near to the wicket, and the ball came close to the wicket, all you had to do was put your thumb next to the wicket to touch the bail, and the man is out. A number of my dad's fingers were bent from cricket injuries. He managed very well indeed. He was a strong man, wiry – very strong and upright. He always had a spring in his step. All that I can remember of the teams at that time was 'Hand on Heart', Batswood – although that may have been a football team, and Yorkshires.

There was not a lot of socialising because that usually involved drinking and smoking and dancing, and my parents would not get involved. They didn't drink or smoke. We had other friends and family that we went to visit. My mother's sister in Salt River, and the others in the September clan in Grassy Park. They were also builders, most of them. Hannes September even built a boat. They also built the first establishment for the blind around where they lived – the Institute of the Blind. Hannes' wife was Tilly who helped in the building. She handed blocks to him when he was up on the scaffolding – that's the way they built. Very hard-working people.

They changed their name and went to Rhodesia, passing themselves off as something they were not. September is such an obvious slave name. You were either proud of it or it was a millstone around your neck. They wanted to get as far away from their past as they could. But there were others in the clan. I was

pleased as punch to have met one of them after coming back from exile – Rueben September. He now lives in Pretoria – a senior man in Telkom and had a lot to do with running the fibre-optic line from Europe to South Africa and the continent. That was his baby – not bad for a man up from slavery. Not ashamed of the past at all.

He told me a story that when he wanted to enter the University of Cape Town, he had to walk every day to get an answer for his application to be admitted to the university, because they would keep asking – ‘What have you heard from Reg September?’ Eventually they gave up and let him in. I was like a bogeyman to the system – a ghost of September past. Every poor lad called September had to have some connection to the man labelled a terrorist freedom fighter. But today that man has a degree and is at the top of the league and doing good work. He has a lovely family.

There were various families in the neighbourhood who would rise to prominence in later years. I particularly remember the Maurice family. The Maurice children and I were friends. My sister Jessie went out with Louis Maurice for a short while and I was close friends with Edgar Maurice who later would become the Vice President of the South African Teacher’s League. George Maurice became a doctor. Mrs Maurice was quite a character. She was a tough woman. I once saw Louis running away from her because he knew he was in trouble. She threw a stick at his legs, and it caught him precisely between the legs as he was running, and he tripped and fell. The Nasson family also lived two doors away from us. Joey Nasson married Peggy Maurice.

Later in the start of my political life when I wanted to go and see Ben Kies about trying to get the teachers to support opposing the introduction to Apartheid on the busses. Edgar Maurice, Dick Parker and I had a discussion on mass action, and it was Edgar Maurice, who at that time was vice-president of the SATL, but

not a member of the Unity Movement, who told me that I would be wasting my time talking to Ben Kies.

Maurice said that the teachers could not afford to step out of line and support protest action practically. The bottom line was that no matter how they expressed themselves politically, they were government employees that had to obey the rules or face loss of income, homes, benefits for their children and the other trimmings of an upwardly mobile class. Anybody trying to get them to do that would be barking up the wrong tree. They are talkers not doers and are a cornerstone of the system even if they could not admit it.

I shared that view, but I still had to find out for myself directly from Ben Kies. Which I did do and in doing so, first got the usual antagonism to communists and then a committal to talk to the teachers about support, as well as a promise to get back to us. None of that commitment materialised. Edgar Maurice was spot on.

While still at school I already quickly developed a consciousness that there was a different mind-set among unionised class-conscious workers that separated them from the middle strata among coloured people. The way of thinking and the politics regardless of left rhetoric was not worker rooted, and neither was there shared hardship or even the same consequences when taking political action.

The theme of contradiction ran through everything Reg could remember from childhood – observations of class, colour, and other prejudices towards people from his community and within his community towards others. In the political arena, which was highly sectarian and dominated by the middle strata who were completely alienated from the working class regardless of colour and their left-wing stance, the contradictions between theory and practice were as stark as the contradictions in broader society.

Reg expressed that the so-called ‘radical tradition’ was skin-deep except for a tiny few totally committed people that increasingly found it difficult to remain in South Africa and still hold the views that they did. These left

South Africa for Australia, Canada, the USA, and the UK. A few moved to the neighbouring African states.

Whether one agrees with Reg's harsh observation or not, he felt that most of those who articulated some kind of trendy radicalism just stayed and lived out the contradiction of being faithful government employees articulating radical sounding politics, without any broader impact in the period of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, after which the political climate changed. Reg would point out particularly how deeply embedded a culture of "othering" rooted in class prejudice and race prejudice was at many levels in South African society. Reg however recognised that from the 1976 generation and 1980s generation a new deeper and meaningful revolutionary tradition emerged among youth classified as Coloured that substantially differed from the radicalism of his youth, in that it spoke of a genuine unity in resistance together with those who were classified as Blacks.

In Reg's teens his awareness grew that all was not right in South Africa and that there was a huge divide between those who were not white and the Europeans, as white people were then called. At the time the terms Non-European and European separated all who were not white from those who saw themselves as white.

Reg also began to become aware of prejudices within different strata in society, even among Coloured people, particularly when it came to the position of those called Natives. In his mind there was an awareness, which made him very critical of his extended family and the dynamics around upward mobility and passing for white. He decried their obsession with shade of skin-tone and their being ashamed of their roots. This seemed to provide the platform for Reg to critically explore his own roots and develop a pride in those who rebelled against injustice and rose above the adversity of slavery, colonialism, genocide, de-Africanisation, and Apartheid.

Reg had enjoyed a very stable childhood with lots of fond memories and faced no severe deprivation, hence his statements that he felt privileged. This came from deep within because he was seeing things around himself that showed him that there were many that did not have even the modest comforts of his childhood in a working-class artisanal family. From a young age he seems to have been making comparisons and summing up what was happening around him. A consciousness was developing and brewed away inside of him. As he got to his mid-teens, the consciousness developed faster.

Reg September attended Broad Road Primary school from about 1929 to the end of 1935, completing Standard Six. Then he attended Wesley Secondary School in Salt River for two years to complete his Junior Certificate. Thereafter he went to Trafalgar High School in District Six for 1938 and 1939 to complete his Senior Certificate.

Reg's first deeper social awakenings began at Broad Road Primary school, continued at Wesley Secondary, where the teachers were also all white, and then his political awakening took place at Trafalgar High.

Reg notes that one of the teachers in Salt River was a member of the Ossewa Brandwag (OB) and he was escorted off the premises at the start of the Second World War. The OB was a Nazi-sympathising extremist group among the white Afrikaners.

Reg tried hard to recall as much as he could from his primary school days: *Broad Road Primary had a reputation for being a 'respectable' school, where one met children from more affluent areas and better-known families, Coloured and White. All the teachers were White except for one Coloured teacher; a man by the name of Alfie Jacobs, the father of the well-known Dr Marion Jacobs. He was the first Coloured teacher to be appointed to the staff, and that was just before I left the school.*

At Broad Road Primary I remember having to visit the principal, J. J. D. Malan, an Afrikaner, who lived in Ottery Road, an area which at the time was largely occupied by Coloured people. However, one of the most memorable events was a visit by the author of the lyrics of “Die Stem”, C.J. Langenhoven. So, I first became acquainted with Die Stem in Sub-Standard A at the school, when Ms Eaton, our teacher, introduced the author, Langenhoven, to us, whereupon he played it for us, and taught us how to sing it. As I grew older, like many of my friends, I avoided singing it. It had so much that smacked of Afrikanerdom as a superior group. When sung at the now famous rugby match between the Springboks and the Wallabies at Newlands, with Madiba declaring the match open, it must have meant a lot to white South Africa, especially the Afrikaners to be accepted by a black South African.

To give you an idea of some of the problems people faced at Broad Road School, a senior member of the medical profession, a well-known specialist, who attended to me, once described his family’s experience at Broad Road Primary.

His mother took him and two brothers to enrolment as youngsters. His mother was politely told that the fairer child could enrol at the school, but the others should go to enrol at another school, which the principal politely named. Such was the level to which our community was expected to stoop in order to comply with the accepted norms of the day. If you asked for a comment from those in a poor area, they would have said something like ‘Djy weet mos, dis ‘n amper wit school’ (You know, it’s almost a white school).

I experienced racism personally directed at me for the first time when at Broad Road Primary school. I remember going to visit a boy who was in the same class as me. One day after school was done, I went off to visit the boy at his home. His elder sisters said I was not welcome and closed the door in my face. They were being white.

My friends at Broad Road Primary were Basil Henry, Cedric Johnson, Claude Capp, Edgar Robertson, Claude Vianello. All of them were white in appearance. I often wondered what they became when strict race classification took place. It was one of these boys whose sister closed the door in my face. Another boy that I played with, Tommy Segars, would have to run inside the house when he spotted his older sister coming from work. He was of course white and would have got into trouble at home if seen playing with me.

It was around this time (1929-30) in Reg's life that an indelible impression was made in his life through his spitting altercation with the white army officer.

In 1936 and 1937, when Reg attended Wesley Secondary School in Salt River, graduating with a Junior Certificate was in itself a great achievement. It was at Wesley that he first met Hettie McCloud, whom he later married, and also others like Oscar Wolheim with whom he played tennikoit and kept up a lifelong friendship.

Starting high school at Trafalgar in 1938 was also Reg September's initiation into the bigger South African picture and the real beginning of his political consciousness. The social consciousness from his small world in Wynberg, Kenilworth, Lansdowne, little Claremont, and smatterings of Salt River under the protective arms of Nicholas and Flora September, would now give way to new influences and deeper understandings of colonialism, racism, and the segregationist system, which ultimately led to Apartheid. He would also learn more about the working-class and class struggle.

Reg's childhood days were a critical period globally. The roaring '20s had given way to the Great Depression, and the defeat of Germany in 1918 led in the 1930s to the spectre of rising German nationalism and racist and political intolerance.

These attitudes first spread to Spain where a civil war raged from 1936 to 1939. The democratically elected Republican loyalist left-leaning political movement had established a Second Spanish Republic and abolished the monarchy, which was in an alliance of convenience with the Anarchists. They were opposed by the Nationalists, who were a Falangist Fascist movement largely rooted in the conservative aristocracy and the Catholic church, supported by rural elements and a dominant faction of the armed forces who sought the leadership of the right-wing general who had become isolated in the Spanish territorial possessions in Morocco – General Francisco Franco. The two sides engaged in a bloody left-against-right war, and volunteer democrats and leftist supporters across the world joined up as an international force to help defend the Second Republic. Germany's Nazis and Italy's Fascists also gave support to Franco's Falange. Politics in every country in the world including South Africa was affected by the Spanish Civil War.

In 1937 China was invaded by Japan and this was the start of the second world war in the East and during that war a civil war took root pitting the communists led by Chairman Mao Zedong against the nationalists led by General Chiang Kai-Shek – a bitter seamless period of 12 years of war. The Spanish Civil War, war in China and the war across the world would have many impacts on liberation struggles in Africa and Asia.

The most active in the political left across a number of organisations in South Africa in 1935 formed the National Liberation League and the Anti-Fascist Front. Reg as a schoolboy became highly aware of and affected by the gravity of this era of war. It alerted him as to what to expect in a few years' time, namely in his last years of schooling at Trafalgar High School. It was then that he came under the influence of the leading personalities that had formed the National Liberation League (NNL) the fore-runner

organisation to the adoption of national liberation adopted by the ANC and others in the latter 1940s.

Reg said: *I think particularly 1938 and 1939 at Trafalgar High School was my introduction to political organisation and personalities which would have a profound effect on me. Miller was the principal when I started at Trafs, but he was followed by P. M. Henniker, known as 'Pyp' (Pipe). My best friend was a chap by the name of Peter Meisenheimer whose family were from Namaqualand in the Northern Cape. He was a serious fellow who was Afrikaans speaking and spoke with what was called a strong 'Brei' (an accent specific to the Namaqualand area in the Cape). It's a very distinctive guttural and spitty sound. He used to get teased a lot for it but was always up for a fight to defend himself, and most backed down. When in a fighting mood he would take off his shoes and socks and put up his fists. Nobody knew the reason for this, but it showed his opponent that he meant business and they would back down.*

It was through his friend that Reg would first be introduced to the most radical left formation in South Africa at that time – The National Liberation League, which was the first organisation, even before what was then a fairly conservative African National Congress, to develop the theory and practice of the politics of National Liberation. It was founded in 1935 by John Gomas, Moses Kotane, James la Guma, Dr Goolam Gool, Zainunissa “Cissy” Gool, and these also had a close relationship to the trades unionist Ray Alexander.

Reg relates: *One lunch time at school, Peter took me to the offices of the National Liberation League (NLL), on the corner of Tennant Street and Hanover Street. I think that this was about the first time I entered an office let alone a political office. I was made to feel welcome. It was an unforgettable experience. They were good working-class people... de Bruyn, Combrinck, Johnny Morley – a left-wing Sergeant Major in the Army known as Red*

Sergeant Major Morley. The Sergeant Major was one of the founders of the left-wing serviceman's organisation, the Springbok Legion. These people took an interest in young people and engaged one in conversation. I was a lad of 16 from the protected confines of the Southern Suburbs.

It was in this period that I got to meet Chris Ziervogel, author of the book 'Brown South Africa' and curator of the Hyman Lieberman Institute and librarian. I also met Moses Kotane for the first time – a man who would take me under his wing. He was a leading member of the NLL and the Communist Party of South Africa. Ziervogel took a keen interest in the students at Trafs and proved to be a wonderful inspiration to our young people. He introduced me to the writings of the well-known British communist party intellectual, R Palme Dutt.

My first meeting with Moses Kotane was when Peter took me along with him to this building in District Six and asked me to wait outside on the pavement saying that he had to just go upstairs quickly and would be down shortly. A fellow, who turned out to be Jimmy la Guma came up to me and asked why I was standing there, so I explained. He said you don't have to wait outside come up with me. And there was Peter talking to Moses Kotane who was busy setting the type for the CPSA newspaper, 'Umsebenzi'. This was the beginning of my life-long personal and political friendship. Little was I to know that this was to be the beginning of the amazing life-long journey that I was to travel.

In relating my period at school in Trafalgar High, I have little to say about the schooling experience itself, save to say that it was the complete opposite of the schooling experience at Broad Road Primary. I got an excellent education and rubbed shoulders with many who would go on to become political giants over the next year. One or two teachers stand out – Mr Ellis Mercury who was my fine arts teacher, and whom I liked. He had such faith in the Teachers League of South Africa. He put his arms around my shoulders one day and said, 'Reggie my boy, don't worry. The day that we have a strong Teachers League of South

Africa, all our troubles will be over.' Little did he realise the extent to which I had already become so much aware of the inability of the Teachers League to lead us anywhere, let alone to liberation.

Reg's real education, his political education, and the development of his consciousness about South Africa and the liberation struggle, were taking place in a little office in District Six and on the Grand Parade at political outreach meetings.

Reg says: *I shall never forget my own experience rising out of the demonstration on the Grand Parade in opposition to the pre-Apartheid Servitude Bill. I remember seeing our school principal, Pyp, catching sight of me as I was walking across the Grand Parade with posters in my hand, taking it up to the platform. He called three of us up to his office, asked us if we had done our homework, and of course we hadn't. He then called Mr Biggs, our physical culture master, to come and give us each six of the best.*

This is perhaps my first bit of punishment for my political participation; the Teachers League mentality in action. It was rather funny, because there was a report of this incident and this thrashing in the columns of The Sun or The Standard newspapers the following week.

As a young teen I had already been exposed to many political discussions, meetings and people and bombarded by many political tendencies. I attended a meeting of the anti-CAD Unity Movement in the Cape Town Drill Hall and was not impressed. I walked out of the meeting very troubled. After doing so I took a long walk and landed up at the home of Moses Kotane in Mount Street. We talked for a long while and this helped to straighten out my thoughts. It clarified many issues for me, and I clearly knew the direction that I needed to take.

This was my beginning of the road of a lifetime in the Communist Party and later the ANC as a Liberation Movement.

Reg's childhood came to an abrupt end in those two years of transition at Trafalgar High School, when the world was hurtled into global war and carnage that would see millions of deaths and towns and cities obliterated.

Reg made it clear that his biography should not be just about him as a person, but should convey ideas and understanding to new generations. He wanted to show how he developed into a political activist against the backdrop of the global fight against Fascism and Nazism. It is thus important to see how this had a lifelong impact on the way Reg September thought and analysed the world around him from the 1940s right through to post-Apartheid South Africa and the mischief with which he had to wrestle. At the heart of Falangism, Japanese imperialism, Fascism and Nazism was the group think of ethno-nationalism – the same scourge faced in South Africa which birthed Apartheid.

Perhaps Reg's childhood experiences and ponderings when looking back bring into focus mostly the issue of identity – Coloured identity and the contradictions thrown up about this identity and about “identity politics”. Reg believed that it was perilous to put one's head in the sand about the politics of “identity” and that one did need to engage in discourse about identity and ensure that it was dealt with in a progressive manner. The wars in the 1930s and the Second World War starkly showed just how extreme identity-politics can be.

Reg also made it clear that putting identity up on a platform as though it was a cornerstone of one's ideological persuasion could only lead one down a perilous path. This is how Fascist movements develop and Africa is not immune to going down a Fascist national socialist path. The Fascist narrow nationalist, race and tribalism element has always been a dangerous factor lurking within almost all the South African political party role-players.

If one tracks the ANC from 1930 to the present one can see manifestations of this tendency arise and get checked almost every 10 years. Post 1994 this tendency got a new life and after 2008 with the rise of the Zumaism cult of personality it became a frightening dominating force challenging and indeed dislodging the centre and left within the ANC. Narrow nationalism and ethnonationalism increasingly defined the ANC after 2008, with little appreciation for non-racialism and internationalism particularly among the mass of the dwindling ANC membership. The revolutionary pact with the South African Coloured People's Congress and the South African Indian Congress that led to both organisations voluntarily being dissolved in favour of one African National Congress movement for all South Africans was rapidly betrayed in the 21st century. Reg could see such a drift occurring one day and believed that the best way that he could contribute to avoiding that trajectory was to write his own story which he dearly wanted to be published in his lifetime. Alas that was not to be so.

Reg was of a generation who saw it all and warned that such narrow nationalist and neo-fascist national-socialist tendencies had arisen a few times in ANC history and had to be vigorously opposed. Only the strong balance of committed socialists within the liberation movement could keep the monster of ethno-nationalism in check. Reg believed that we must wrestle with this demon of narrow-nationalism and race-politics because herein lay the potential mischief for all sorts of political, social and human-rights aberrations and atrocities, as we well know from the Apartheid era that we have lived through.

The 1930s and early 1940s were a time when crucial political lessons were learnt by many like Reg, which he felt should not be lost today. The politics of black people is not immune to turning rightwards towards neo-colonialism and even fascism.

At Trafalgar High School Reg sat next to students from the Afrikaans-speaking working-class and rural areas for the first time, and he also had a Native student in his small Senior Certificate class. He engaged in political and social conversations across the rigid lines that had dominated the early years of his childhood, and this would set him on a very different trajectory for the rest of his life.

The transition for Reg, to Trafalgar High School and then into the world of work, during the years of the rise of Nazism – German National Socialism – and Fascism across Europe were also years of pre-Apartheid crystallising of oppression of all non-Europeans in South Africa as manifested in the ominous Servitude Bill. At an international and at a local level Reg was entering into his manhood years in momentous times.

Perhaps it is apt to end this chapter on the childhood of Reg September, with his own poetic tribute to his proud artisan, sportsman and fisherman father, Nicholas, the descendent of September van Batavia, who was a role-model and gave him the grounding for the man he was to become.

Nicholas “Boy” September

*He was so brown,
so copper was his skin,
his hair so short and curly,
his fingers gnarled, yet strong.*

*His eyes so swift
to note the change of flight.
His plane, hammer, chisel, and saw,
spoke millions of his skill with all.*

*This man, this man,
the master with the cricket ball.
The fisher who knew the coastline shore
was kind and taught me so much more.*

*He was tough and never tired,
would cycle miles, yet cast the line,
and catch the fish and trap the crawler.*

*Would care for mother, would care for all,
Beaming, providing with pride
bringing it home; my father
– Nicholas “Boy” September.*

Reg, like many others forced into exile and imprisonment or anonymity in the resistance underground during those dark days of Apartheid, carried much sadness and pain when he did not have contact with his parents and family for so long.

Of his parents Reg says: *My father lived to the age of about eighty-four. My mother died about twenty years earlier: cancer. I never saw her when she died – I was in England. I saw none of them in the end. It upsets me sometimes.*

In February 2005 Reg penned a few paragraphs where he bared his soul and allowed himself to grieve. He expressed the grief that had been bottled up for decades. He had used all sorts of coping mechanisms to deal with the pain of severance that Apartheid had imposed on those who fought it. Severance from kith and kin and what it did to one is little talked about by the cadres of the struggle.

Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish writes about the lives of exiles who “travelled all over the world in service to the struggle but who returned to nowhere.” That was Reg September’s world for over 28 years. The passing of his mother when he was sent on his first mission to London, and the passing of his father while he was away in exile was deeply painful. Here he allows the grief and pain to come to the fore: *I loved my mother so dearly. I respected my father so deeply. It is noticeable that it is only now in my twilight years that I grieve for them; that I shed tears for them. They brought me into this world, they fed and clothed me, taught me right from wrong. They nursed me when I had pneumonia. They put plaster on my knees when I fell.*

I am now married to Melissa Steyn for the past six years or so and I must confess that it is only now through discussions with her that I’ve come to understand so much about myself. As a small child I do remember sitting on the table while my mother cut vegetables. I remember being so proud when at a later stage I helped her cut the vegetables. I can picture my mother sitting in front of the coal stove waiting for my father to return from work and seeing him greet her with such warmth. Stroking her hair, while sitting alongside her. I remember his pride when he returned with a beautiful fish or two after an angling trip and when he lifted the fresh potatoes from the back garden or bought a box of beautiful fresh peaches. He was a provider, and my father kept the fire in the house burning and put food on the table.

I used to go shopping with my mother and go fishing with my father and he carried me on the cross-bar of his bicycle from Kenilworth to Strandfontein. I spent many hours with him in his woodworking shed at home, and slept with him in a tent when he had a building contract away from home. This looking back helps me appreciate the validity of Melissa’s observations that I instinctively hated those and that which lacked respect for my parents. For the first time I am

now able to look back and see where I come from and to have some understanding of what makes me tick.

I must be growing older and now have a space to think about things more personally. Thinking back, I missed out on that sort of personal introspection; there were other things to do. Thank you, father time and thank you Melissa.

3

Entry into politics – organisational and ideological

Reg September's two years at Trafalgar High School and his first two years in the building trade and shoemaking trade were where he got his political grounding. The year 1939 was momentous, as the world again went to war as the result of the rise of Nazism and Fascism. Reg's first steps into the political world were against this dramatic backdrop.

Reg elaborates on his baptism into political life: *While still at school I met people who were in the National Liberation League like Jimmy la Guma, Cissie Gool, Goolam Gool, Moses Kotane, Chris Ziervogel, Abdurasiet Brown and Johnny Gomas, as well as trades unionists like Ray Alexander, left journalists like Wolfie Kodesh and numerous other people on the left. All of these people, regardless of their affiliations, played a role in developing my political and social consciousness. I was 16 and it was a period when there was a lot of political activity in Cape Town. The NLL also had its own newspaper – The Liberator, which I would read to gain further political education.*

Reg's first big political engagement was in the anti-Servitude Bill protests of 1939. Reg explained: *In 1939, R E Stuttaford, owner of the exclusive departmental store, introduced the Servitude Bill, which would have given the provincial administration the right to impose the equivalent of the Group Areas Act, which was later in 1950 introduced by the National Party.*

It is true to say that at that time already of course most of our people lived in segregated areas. This was not imposed legally, but by class dynamics in a situation where class and colour co-related and white domination basically enforced its will, street by street. Most of the Coloured people were working class and most were rent-paying tenants, and most had paid so much rent over time to white landlords that it paid for the property. A few artisans and some of the Coloured lower middle strata in time had come to own their properties and the merchant strata all own property.

The people were not prepared to take the legal imposition of this pre-apartheid lying down, and the National Liberation League, together with the Non-European United Front and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) led the upsurge. Cape Town had never experienced such a challenge to authority. The biggest ever demonstration was mounted from the Grand Parade and environs. Cissie Gool, daughter of Dr Abdurrahman, stood there at the head of it all, defiant in the image of Joan of Arc, as beautiful and feisty as ever. The mood was electric, challenging, defiant and proud.

We sang (to the tune of Clementine) –

*Ons bruin mense,
bymekaar nou,
vra ons eie land terug,
dat gesteel is van ons vaders,
toe hul in die donker sug.
Gee dit terug nou,
Weg met al die slaverny,
Niemand kan ons ophou nie,
Stuttaford kan ons nie ophou nie,*

*Herzog kan ons nie ophou nie,
Malan kan ons nie ophou nie,
Afrika sal ons Vryheid kry.*

*(Us brown people,
together now,
ask for our own land back,
that was stolen from our fathers,
when they sighed in the dark.
Away with all this slavery,
No one can stop us,
Stuttaford cannot stop us,
Herzog cannot stop us,
Malan cannot stop us,
Africa will get its Freedom).*

After the rally, crowds surged through the streets of the city, venting their anger, and smashing the windows of Stuttaford's department store in the process.

And of course, the authorities brought out all of the forces at their command. The South African police force carried firearms for the first time. It was at this upsurge that Louis Maurice, a member of a highly respected family in Cape Town, and a very courageous young man, disarmed a policeman for his rifle, and smashed the rifle on a lamppost. Cape Town was in revolt. The Servitude Bill was stopped in its tracks. It was in 1939 that the talk of segregation was temporarily set aside and replaced by posters – We need you for the war.

For Reg it was the end of his schooling and the beginning of working life. As regards his entry into working life he says: *I spent the first year after my schooling in the building trade. A family friend, Dougie Solomons, had employed*

my brother Cecil as a foreman carpenter, so I was taken in as a carpenter's assistant. I enjoyed carpentry very much. I enjoy working with wood to this day. But of course, I always recognised the insecurity which any building worker experiences.

I remember very clearly the joblessness among building workers, especially during winter periods. They'd have six months of work when the weather is good, and when it rained in Cape Town there was no work for you. This together with the fact that the only way to go forward in life as a carpenter was to get an apprenticeship, but being a very sought-after apprenticeship, I faced great competition for such an apprenticeship. Likewise in the building industry electrician or plumbing apprenticeships were few to come by, so I had to look outside of the building industry for an apprenticeship.

Reg recalled a humorous but rather humiliating incident when one of the older carpenters, in front of Dougie Solomons, took a jibe at him. Reg was busy struggling with hitting a three-inch nail into a beam and the chap shouted at him, 'Hit the bloody nail, man, it's got no mother or father.' Dougie Solomons could see Reg's discomfort and flushed face and called out to Reg, 'Why don't you hit him, Reg?' After a year on building sites, Reg found that this trade was not for him and moved on: *I went into the shoe industry and fought for the right to become apprenticed as a leather cutter. I was looking for security more than anything else and I didn't at that stage recognise the exploitative character of the apprenticeship system. I had to fight very hard to get apprenticed so that I could become an artisan in the shoe industry.*

This meant fighting the prejudiced Apprenticeship Board, taking the matter to the Industrial Council, and even fighting the White-led trade's union of the time. After a while the firm closed down and I had to go to Durban to finish my apprenticeship.

That experience was a great one for me politically, because it gave me a perspective outside of the narrow, incestuous, and very middle-class and theoretical far-left political culture which had a stranglehold on Cape Town's political scene. Many of the radical left role players had no idea about the realities of working-class people, yet claimed to be the vanguard of the cause of the working class. It was all theories from books and debates and a position of comfort. These play-play politicians, middle class characters were very childish and self-indulgent.

In my industrial working life, workers talked about politics and the issues of the day in a very different kind of language. It was down to earth. Life in the trades union movement was practical and very different from university, college, and teachers' forums at schools. This was the real dividing line between working-class reality and the purely intellectual world of the Trotskyite far-left.

I was still 17 when I met Dr Yusuf Dadoo for the first time when he came down to Cape Town to address a big meeting on the Grand Parade under the auspices of the National Liberation League and the Non-European United Front. He was one of my heroes. As far as I was concerned, he was one of the finest leaders that South Africa ever had. It is through him and the others in the NLL that I came to realise very, very clearly indeed that the future of the Coloured communities rested in its development of a relationship; a political relationship with the organisations representing those labelled 'Natives' who now champion their own cause proudly as 'Africans'. It was ironic that Coloured people before being so labelled, once were at the forefront of being proudly African when the APO was formed, and even long before that.

This was another gripe that I had with the Trotskyite far-left in Cape Town. Just as much as they claimed to champion the working-class, but were a privileged middle-class movement with little contact with the working class, they also kept talking about unity and the black masses, but were almost exclusively a Coloured middle-class formation with a lot of the 'white' tendencies and pretentiousness

that I had observed as a child – a cut above the rest. Yes, there were a few intellectual personalities from among the toiling masses, but that was it. They largely separated themselves from other African communities!

Reg described the consequences he faced for attending his first big political demonstration at Cape Town's Grand Parade: *I remember having seen our principal Mr Heneke catching sight of me as I was walking across the Grand Parade with posters in my hand, taking it up to the platform. He called us up to his office the following day after the school assembly and asked us if we had done our homework, and of course we hadn't. He then called in Mr Biggs, our physical culture master, to give us each six of the best. This was my first bit of punishment for my political participation. It was rather funny because there was a report of this incident and this thrashing in the columns of either The Sun or the Evening Standard the following week.*

Like my baptism into the political world in Cape Town during my apprenticeship days in Durban, I met trades unionists, politically conscious workers and members of the Indian Congress and African National Congress and Communists. These were people like H A Naidoo, Debbie Singh, J N Singh, Ismail Meer, Monty Naicker, Errol and Dorothy Shanley. But I didn't complete my apprenticeship because the contradictions of the apprenticeship system came to the fore.

I was doing an artisan or journeyman's work but not getting their wages. In fact, I was getting a fraction of their wages. It paid me better to go back down to Cape Town and get the wages of an unskilled cutter and by now I was all but a journeyman. But that too was to be my transition into going into the trades union arena full time.

After some time, I became involved with the National Union of Distributive Workers as a union organiser in Cape Town. I then moved to Port Elizabeth

continuing to work with distributive workers and with textile workers in the Textile Workers Industrial Union.

The immediate post-schooling work experience of Reg September on building sites and particularly as a factory worker was a most important rite of passage, learning and development experience. This was as important as the mentorship he received from Moses Kotane, John Gomas, James la Guma, Cissie Gool, Ray Alexander and Wolfie Kodesh, among others. This, more than anything, else set him apart from the middle-class left from the academic world.

As an industrial worker for a large part of my life I can speak from my own experience when saying that the character shaping and the intellectual shaping that takes place in the labour environment of mass production develops its own unique consciousness. When you slave away, day in and day out, producing products for sale as a collective of wage-labourers, aware of the prices of the products and commodities that you produce, and of the fact that your dirt low remuneration is a fraction of the profit gained by your employers for that product, it creates a consciousness much greater than pure theoretical understanding. Reg would frequently express that the middle-strata politicians of Cape Town within the Coloured community were an irritant factor in his life as a young worker as they had no clue of life beyond their class.

Everyone in a factory has a station in factory life and you spend much more time on the factory floor mixing with your class of workers than you spend at home with family or with your community. You don't get to choose who you work with, and you are part of a huge mass of people, each with behaviours and thinking that you have no option but to integrate with. Most factory environments are not good for your health either. They are dirty, full of dangerous equipment, fumes, and dust. The work is monotonous and

taxing. There are bullies among you and in South Africa, even security police spies that observe you and report on you.

It is so very different to the lives of university students, teachers, and professionals. It is a culture in itself. Reg's recorded narrative constantly emphasises this social reality as something that those he saw as the middle-class trendy lefty circles did not understand, and their behaviours infuriated him because ultimately it endangered those who were involved in real struggles with murderous opponents.

The abrasiveness of Reg's experience with his contemporaries in white collar professions and tertiary students jumps out at once from his notes and transcripts of tape recordings.

Workplace life is also a hive of intellectual discourse very different in expressions and content to that outside of one's class. Workers read, debate, and express their views just like the middle strata but it's often a completely different language. In factories too, those classified as different races also engage shoulder to shoulder and the contradictions in broader South African life come into play in a much harsher manner, on what we called the shop-floor. Attitudes on the so-called radical-left intellectuals towards those seen to be under communist influence was also abrasive. They thought of Communist Party and Trades Unions under communist influence as uneducated, intellectually inferior and indoctrinated. This divide in those years saw each side engage in othering and pulling each other apart in a most destructive manner and this clash of perspectives carried well on into the next three decades.

Reg had a few years of shop-floor worker experience before taken his next steps of political activism, whereas his well-off, middle-class age group contemporaries went to university and attained professions. He would never get the opportunity in his life to pursue further education. His educated

middle-strata contemporaries had a more leisurely lifestyle far removed from the social realities of the majority of people and they had disposable incomes for things that workers could only dream about. From being a factory worker and meeting other highly politically conscious factory workers across the race-silos, Reg became a full-time trades union organiser.

An active union organiser was hated by factory foremen and factory owners alike. They were considered to be agitators and troublemakers. The full wrath of the system was always dogging them. Their pay was terrible. In Reg's case it was half of what he had been earning while working in the factory, so it was not an easy option.

In this new environment Reg was a novice, under the guidance of some of South Africa's finest union leaders – Ray Alexander, Kay Moonsamy, Nancy Dick, Raymond Mhlaba, Archie Sibeko, Vuyisile Mini, and so many more. He quickly became a seasoned trades unionist. He was by now also a full member of the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), a part-time journalist and salesperson for the left newspaper, *The Guardian*, and was working with the African National Congress more and more. These were Reg's foundation years in the political struggle.

There were no other Coloured youth who had quite the same all-round experience; not even the slightly younger Alex la Guma, who had grown up in a highly politicised home, had quite the same broad experience. Reg too was the first in his family to engage in the trades union and political world.

Many of the people that Reg encountered in his last year at school and who became a lasting influence on his life were communists. One of the greatest influences on his life was the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), which after disbanding resurrected itself in the underground in 1953 and was later called the South African Communist Party.

But at the time Reg was entering the CPSA orbit the party was just recovering from being terminally ill and organisationally had gone back to zero because of factionalism and internal fighting. The small circle of communists that Reg first encountered in District Six were busy building the CPSA afresh. It is this revived CPSA that Reg joined as a candidate member, as was the party tradition, and then progressed to be a full member.

The CPSA was founded on 30 July 1921 and its roots go back to a split in the South African Labour Party (SALP) on the issue of the government's support for the First World War. A number of Labour leaders were anti-war and were part of the War-on-War League. They believed that the war was between different capitalist imperial powers who were using workers as cannon fodder. In 1915 Bill Andrews, David Ivon Jones, Sydney Percival Bunting, and Colin Wade left the SALP to form the International Socialist League of South Africa (ISL).

The league's newspaper, *The International*, for the first time took a position that argued that without full rights for the "native working class", internationalism was hollow. It did not however at this stage take this theory to its practical, logical conclusion. The 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia was felt all over the world and it influenced the ISL deeply. It also influenced the many socialist clubs and formations in Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg.

The founding Party Congress brought different organisations together in mid-1921. Those that gathered together were the United Communist Party, the Marxian Club, the International Socialist League (ISL) and the Jewish Socialist Society. The ISL was the largest constituent of the CPSA when it was formed at the end of July and *The International* became the party's official newspaper. At this stage it was still very much a white working-class party.

In 1921, Witwatersrand mining companies wanted to set aside the colour bar so that they could hire cheaper black labour. This led to the 1922 white miners' strike, which went on to become an armed uprising known as the "Red Revolt" under the red flag and with socialist slogans but with a racial twist – 'Workers of the World Fight and Unite for a White South Africa.'

The first shift of the CPSA from the white working class and its bigotry and segregationist stance came in 1924 when the annual conference of the CPSA adopted a resolution 'to take the message of communism to the oppressed working class and establish the mass base among the Africans'. The first practical step was to promote Africans including T W Thibedi, Gana Makabeni, E J Khaile, Moses Kotane, John Gomas, and James la Guma to leadership positions.

Reg September was only a year old at this time and the latter three leaders were to become three of the most influential people in his life. He first met them in District Six during his high school years.

When Jimmy la Guma reported to the Communist International, known as the "Comintern", in March 1927, his report said that the CPSA had '125 members in black organisations and in the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union [ICU]'. Jimmy la Guma and Johnny Gomas were members and office-bearers in the CPSA, the APO, the ICU, and the ANC – the four leading black organisations of that time.

Jimmy la Guma further said, 'We have formulated a policy for the CPSA members that they must push inside these (other three) organisations, which they do to the best of their ability.'

As a result of this bold activity, the more conservative founder of the ICU, Clements Kadalie, a Malawian, expelled La Guma, Khaile and Gomas. Initially the African National Congress, which was very conservative at the time, warned its members to guard against communist infiltration. Later, for

a brief time after the ANC leader, Josiah Gumede, visited Moscow to attend the World Congress of the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU), he went so far as to embrace the communists and their party, but was quickly pulled into line by the conservatives in the ANC who replaced him as leader in 1930.

At this time, the African National Congress was a conservative movement of intellectuals, religious leaders, professionals, and business people who had a tenuous relationship with the black working class and had no real in-depth or strongly coherent approach to the concept of “national liberation”. It had not yet become a leading progressive force in the country.

In 1919, it started an organisational review process and in 1923 it had adopted a constitution and new name instead of the name “South African Native National Congress”. It is from this time that it was called the African National Congress following the lead of the APO over twenty years earlier. This had been a time of progress and foundational cohesion, but then the ANC regressed again, and in the 1930s much of the ANC was in the doldrums.

In 1935 the newly formed National Liberation League (NLL) introduced the idea of national liberation and united fronts or alliances into South African politics. It was this appearance of the NLL on the scene that changed the nature of the ANC radically. John Gomas, James la Guma, and Moses Kotane, all of whom were leaders in the trades union movement, the CPSA and in the African National Congress, were the bridge that influenced the ANC youth and labour constituencies to rise to invigorate the ANC to move into a new mode of struggle. From 1944, the new ANC Youth League took up the baton of change in the ANC.

The CPSA began to organise night schools for African workers who were labelled “Native” and “Coloured” and to build new industrial trades unions

for all non-Europeans. Whereas in 1927 the CPSA had 400 members of whom only 100 were black, by 1929 the party had around 200 white members to 3 000 black members. The nature of the party had changed. Huge ructions took place within the CPSA because of both its ideological changes and practices on the one hand, and on the other hand, its majority black working-class membership, most of whom were in trades unions. The white left were not immune to colonial mentalities, and this too contributed to the ructions.

By the time Reg was finishing Standard Six (Grade 8) at Broad Road Primary, Albert Nzula had become the first black general secretary of the CPSA and Edwin Mofutsanyana and John Gomas were elected to serve on the editorial board of a publication of the Comintern – *The Negro Worker*.

After James la Guma presented a report in Moscow, Nikolai Bukharin, the head of the Comintern, recommended a push by the CPSA for an independent “Native Republic” which was confirmed as policy by the 6th Congress of the Comintern.

It was this position that caused great ructions in the CPSA, particularly with many white objections and fairly extensive objections by some black members too. There were many who also felt that the Comintern was dominating the CPSA with what was called “Bolshevisation” and walking over its independence. This came to a head when British Communist Douglas Wolton was sent to South Africa to strengthen the hand of local communists Albert Nzula, Eddie Roux and Moses Kotane. Douglas Wolton met Molly Walton, a Lithuanian immigrant to South Africa, married her, and they became a formidable duo who fanned a wave of destabilisation and antagonism within the CPSA with comrades branding each other “Trotskyites”, “White-chauvinists”, “Rightists”, “Sectarians” and “Deviationists”. It all but destroyed the gains made by the party. The “Native Republic” as it was projected in this toxic scenario had become

warped from the original push for a working-class republic where the social reality was that the working class in the majority were those then called ‘Natives’ – and the CPSA in majority were non-Europeans.

By the time Reg started engaging with the CPSA, this fractious and negative climate had begun to ease off and the “Native Republic” slogan was set aside. The slogan and the manner in which it was introduced had lost the plot, so to say, and the conflict involved all sorts of deviations that had much more to do with European politics than with Africa.

Now, the original nuanced motivating force behind the argument for a focus on black people, the mass of the working-class, and for leadership to arise out of the black working-class, continued with its earliest motivators, John Gomas, James la Guma, and Moses Kotane, ensuring it to be the cornerstone of building the CPSA afresh. This nuanced change could be differentiated as the non-European or black working-class forwarding anti-colonial national liberation and anti-imperial internationalism, as opposed to a simple narrow native-nationalism.

Reg witnessed the birth of a new focus not only in the CPSA but also in the ANC and the labour movement and the broader mass democratic forces throughout South Africa. Reg had come into the political arena at a time that a paradigm shift was taking place. The people mentoring him were the architects who developed what probably can be said to have been the first Black Consciousness movement in South Africa, which firmly stated that there could be no revolution, and no liberation, unless it was led by the majority non-European working-class of South Africa, united as black people regardless of what ethnic or cultural group one was born into.

However, it was the focus on building the trades union movement and the formation of the National Liberation League in 1935 that began to get the CPSA and the ANC out of the doldrums. Both the CPSA and the ANC

began to be redefined by the focus of the NLL on promoting working-class organisation in trades unions among all workers but with an emphasis on the black working-class, putting huge efforts into developing an anti-fascist front which was hugely educational and linked to building internationalism. This introduced the concepts of Alliances, a United Front and National Liberation into South African politics. The new thinking and ways of organising would come dominate South African politics for the next half century.

The founding fathers and mothers of the National Liberation League were to change the face of South African politics for the next seven decades. The depth of thinking of Reg's mentors propelled the entire liberation movement, in its broadest definition, for decades. When Reg September joined the National Liberation League it was his first induction into the Liberation Movement. It was the first political organisation that he joined in his teens.

Back in the late 1930s and 1940s, what the Comintern thought or did, never meant much in the course of time because most of them were killed in Stalin's purges or died in prisons in the USSR. The scourge of factionalism had run its course among South Africa's communists, but not so with the so-called 'radical-left'.

Self-devouring extremism and the religionising and militarising of the secular socialist movement had triumphed up to this point. Those murdered as a result of Comintern battles of the mind included a number of South African Communists – Lazar Bach, the Richter brothers, Glazer and the Davidovs. It was a really rough time and only much later during the time of Gorbachev's 'perestroika and glasnost' did the full truth emerge.

In the late 1980s for Reg and some of us it was sad to see the grief and tears of one stalwart communist, then a very old lady, Ray Harmel, who was

the lover of one of those South Africans who were killed, as she held our hands and repeated, 'so they did kill him... so they did kill him'. The revelations that came out of the USSR, then in the flux of change, affected the thinking of many in the SACP, including Reg September, but in other cases there was literally no effect.

The kind of renewal led by Kotane, Gomas, La Guma and Alexander had a profound effect at that time in the 1930s. In 1938 many unions emerged through the hard work of the same communists who were the backbone of the NLL and the Anti-Fascist United Front.

A Council of Non-European Trade Unions was established too, and because Cape Town became the centre of Communist support, the party headquarters was moved there and some of those expelled a decade earlier re-joined the party. The new politburo of the CPSA at this time was Bill Andrews, Ray Alexander, Sam Kahn, Zainunissa "Cissie" Gool, Moses Kotane and Jack Simons.

It was a realignment which brought fellow travellers together with more cohesion of thought and practice as well as a strong focus on the working class. The vast majority of party members were black people but there was still a disproportionate number of white people in the leadership regardless of how progressive they were. The progressive call was ground-breaking, for anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist national liberation to frame the struggle as a whole with the black working-class leading and entrenching working-class hegemony in the struggle and in the demands for a new South Africa.

The communists' new focus was on reviving and renewing organisations among all non-Europeans, particularly those labelled 'Natives' who were the most marginalised and exploited. One of those organisations, which was given assistance by communists like J B Marks, was the African National Congress. Marks, a trades unionist and communist was to become the

General Secretary of the ANC in the Transvaal. He had a strong base of support among mineworkers.

Communists also helped to push the drive of the ANC for unity and helped to establish the All-African Convention against the disfranchisement of the “Natives” in the Cape. In 1939 communists also joined with Trotskyists and other leftist organisations to establish the broad Non-European United Front (NUEF) in Cape Town, which took a strong stand against segregation and called for full equality for all non-Europeans.

At an international level while some South Africa communists like Ray Alexander, a true fiery internationalist, warned against simply seeing the Second World War as an imperialist war and argued that Fascism and Nazism were a danger to all of humanity, and that on this occasion the USSR may be making a big mistake in going into a pact with Adolf Hitler. Ray from personal experience also knew that regardless of communist rule in the USSR there was two million strong ethnic Russian nationalist Nazi supporters operating in Russia, as well as in some of the west Asian republics. Even in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia the Nazi supporters were strong and in Ukraine there were around 230 000 Nazi supporters. Most of her colleagues argued in support for the Soviet-German Pact. Some called for Ray Alexander to be expelled from the CPSA for speaking out against the Soviet pact with Hitler, but time would prove her to be right, when Hitler broke the pact and invaded the USSR, and recruited almost two million Nazi-sympathisers in Russia into their forces and from 100 000 Nazi-sympathisers in Poland to 230 000 in Ukraine. These collaborators all had allegiance to narrow ethno-nationalist ideas and organisations. The ignorance in the South African left about Eastern European political realities astounded her. Ray believed in teaching people

how to think rather than act like football team supporters who blindly operated on brand loyalty.

The move to support the Soviet-German Pact resulted in many thinking communists turning their backs on the Party just when it was beginning on a more united and coherent path. But then Hitler broke the pact with the USSR and invaded. The CPSA suddenly changed course and threw its weight behind the war effort and once more its membership grew, and its infrastructure grew.

Some in the CPSA learnt a huge lesson from this in terms of avoiding 'blind support' for a party line. Others ignored this monumental lesson. Because Reg was cutting his political teeth under the mentorship of the most progressive CPSA people in the NLL he was exposed to these important political lessons, and this helped to shape his thinking in later years.

During this time the CPSA had its clearest and most cohesive ideological approach, which could easily be argued and defended. Its programme called for the establishment of a Socialist Republic in South Africa, based on common ownership of the means of production and the rule of the working-class - effectively black majority rule. This Socialist Republic would provide equal rights and opportunities for all racial and national groups, and national liberation was to be achieved within the framework of a workers' republic that was an anti-imperialist and an anti-colonial African independent entity aligned to other countries globally who followed the same principles. It was a much-improved articulation than the simplistic "Native Republic" concept. It was also a lot clearer to formulations that would emerge later in time.

The CPSA made it clear that it was fighting for this in a situation where the oppressors constituted a minority European controlled state and where over 94 percent of people were oppressed non-Europeans without the most

basic rights. It also articulated that in South Africa there was a correlation between class and colour, and therefore effectively the Worker's Republic and African seizure of power and liberation were intricately bound together. Social and economic empowerment, if it was truly class-based, would automatically result in a state where the majority were black, achieving liberation for Africans regardless of the race compartments of race-classification. If one simply approached transformation on the basis of colour or the pseudo-scientific notion of "race", it was argued that it would be very likely that the poor underclasses would be pushed aside and white and black upper classes would unite and dominate, or at best a dominant tiny black capitalist class joined at the hip with white-capital would emerge among black people and simply become a comprador classical neo-colonial dominant group.

It was in this context too that the CPSA elevated and made highly visible the explanation that imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism, and that colonialism and neo-colonialism were the dominant forces of oppression in Africa and Asia. Thus, National Liberation was intricately bound up with anti-imperialism and the thrust for a Workers' State, distinguishing it from narrow-nationalism. The struggle was one of fighting for economic freedom and African liberation for all who rallied to the African cause in South Africa. This theory captured the mind of the young Reg September. The rise of fascism around the world and the raging global war influenced the thinking at the time and helped people separate intellectual, ideological posturing from the practical realities of life.

The National Liberation League's influence on the ANC created a climate for a new calibre of youthful African leadership to arise between 1944 and 1949. A number of young intellectuals such as Anton Lebede, Walter Sisulu, Dan Thloome, A P Mda, Robert Sobukwe, Oliver Tambo, and

Nelson Mandela, arose in the ANC Youth League during this time and added a much deeper anti-colonial, African and Pan-African flavour to the foundational work of the early pioneers in the NLL. The NLL leadership were the fathers and mothers of modern political organisation and of trades unions. The young Reg September was fascinated with these leaders, some of whom he had first met in District Six in his final schooldays. They blew him away and he was captivated and mesmerised and hung on their every word and action.

The National Liberation League was founded by James “Jimmy” la Guma, Zainunissa “Cissie” Gool, John Gomas, Moses Kotane, Dr Goolam Gool, and Christopher Ziervogel; each one a remarkable person.

Working very closely with all of them was the communist trades unionist Ray Alexander and Wolfie Kodesh who worked on the left newspapers New Age and Guardian after de-mobilisation post-WW2. Reg had entered a world that would offer him a better education than any university could offer, and he would end up working with these personalities for the rest of his and their lives.

On 1 December 1935, the day of the celebration of emancipation from slavery, Cissie Gool as the first President of the Cape Town based NLL and James la Guma as General Secretary, launched the National Liberation League.

The NLL was an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist movement of unity which called for a political alliance of all the oppressed against Capitalism, Imperialism and Fascism. The NLL emblem was a black enslaved person with severed chains, holding aloft a flaming torch, with the slogan 'For equality, land and freedom'. At the founding conference a programme and constitution were adopted to unite individuals and organisations to fight for social, political, and economic equality and freedom.

Reg September – Liberated African

For Reg September, the descendent of an enslaved man by the name of September of Batavia as well as other enslaved and Indigenes who had been reduced to slave labour, all of whom contributed to the building of South Africa, the word “Liberation” and the emblem of a slave breaking his chains symbolised for Reg who he wanted to be. Freedom from slavery was deeply etched in the minds of politically conscious descendants of the enslaved.

4

Entry into politics – the mentors

Six personalities with whom Reg first came into contact in the late 1930s would have a remarkable impact on the rest of his life. He was mentored into political activism by Moses Kotane, Jimmy la Guma, John Gomas, Cissie Gool, Ray Alexander and Dr Goolam Gool. There were many others like Dr Yusuf Dadoo, but these six made an indelible mark on his life and set the edges of Reg's political activism. Except for one, with whom he later came to have unreconcilable differences, he also worked alongside them until each passed on.

Moses Mauane Kotane⁴ was a great and powerful influence in Reg September's life. Reg first met Moses when he was still a schoolboy at Trafalgar High School. When he first saw Kotane, Moses was busy typesetting the party's newspaper. Reg would work with Moses during those pestilent years of 1938 – 1960 and he would later join Moses in exile and work with him until his passing.

Moses Kotane was born on 9 August 1905 at Tamposstad in the Rustenburg district of the then Western Transvaal. His parents were Samuel Segogwane, a lay preacher and traditional healer, and his mother, Siporah Mmadira Kotane, a part time seamstress. Moses was the second eldest in a family of 11 children. He was brought up in a religious Lutheran home and

⁴ Bunting B; *"Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary: A Political Biography"*; Inkululeku; London; (1975)

grew up doing what all children in peasant families have to do from a young age - he herded cattle, and only went to school at the age of 15. That gave him two short years to learn to read and write, before joining a farmer's workforce.

In 1922, he left the farm and went to Krugersdorp in search of work. Moses sought out books wherever he could lay his hands on them, and this improved his vocabulary and his perspectives on life. He held down a variety of jobs as a domestic worker, bakery worker, photographer's assistant, and mineworker. By 1928 he had joined the African Bakers' Union (ABU), which was part of the new Federation of Non-European Trades Unions (FNETU).

Moses Kotane also joined the African National Congress and the Communist Party of South Africa. For a while he left the ANC because he saw it as weak, ineffectual, and too narrow in its thinking. By 1929 he was the vice-chairperson of the FNETU and a member of the politburo of the CPSA. Parallel to this he had enrolled in the night school that the CPSA ran in Ferreirastown, Johannesburg.

After a clash with Lazar Bach within the Polit Bureau, Moses Kotane was removed from the CPSA leadership largely due to his stance in support of the need for the CPSA to move away from being a predominantly white party to become a predominantly black workers party. Later, the same happened to J B Marks, the Mineworkers Union leader. It was at this stage, in 1937, that Moses Kotane relocated to Cape Town. He got married to his first wife, Sophia Human, there. They had two children, Joseph, and Leonard, in the next few years.

Moses Kotane became well known for his knowledge of politics and his discipline and hard work. It was this that led him to work full time for the

CPSA by the time that Reg September started Standard One (Grade Three) at school.

During his high school days at Trafalgar High School, Reg met up with Kotane, when Moses was a major figure in the NLL, and he had already become General Secretary of the CPSA in 1939. Kotane was also one of the main contributors to the newspaper *Umsebenzi, The Worker*, and in spite of holding such senior office, he also was typesetter for the newspaper.

Reg met a humble but very astute man when his schoolfriend Peter introduced them. Moses held the post of General Secretary for many years until his death in exile in the USSR on 19 May 1978.

Moses Kotane was regarded as one of the CPSA's leading intellectuals, who was able to seamlessly merge pan-African ideas and Marxism. Reg always spoke warmly of Moses Kotane who entered his life at just the right moment in time. In 1956 both Reg and his mentor Moses Kotane were among 156 imprisoned and put on trial for treason. Moses became an uncle figure in Reg's life just like in later years Reg would become an uncle-figure in so many activist lives, some of which we will deal with later in this book where people speak of their personal engagements with Reg as their underground "handler".

James Arnold la Guma⁵, better known as "Jimmy", was born in Bloemfontein in 1894. He was the elder of two children born to a cobbler, Arnold la Guma, and his wife Jemima, but by the time he was five both of his parents had died. He was then cared for by a washerwoman and later adopted by his uncle, James Mansfield, who lived in Parow, Cape Town. At the age of eight, Jimmy la Guma first went out to work at a Parow bakery.

⁵ La Guma A; (edt) Adhikari M; *Jimmy La Guma: A biography (Voices of black South Africans series)*; Friends of the South African Library, Cape Town; (1997)

In 1907, at age 13, his family moved to the city, and he entered an apprenticeship as a leather worker at a small Jewish firm in Caledon Street.

Already at the age of 12, Jimmy was attending political and organised labour meetings. He participated in the so-called “hooligan riots” that engulfed Cape Town for several days in 1906. In 1912, at the age of 18, when the South African Native National Congress was formed, Jimmy went to Namibia (*then German South West Africa*) as a recruited indentured worker. Indentured labour was the successor system that took over from slavery. Often it was little better than slavery. Floggings and ill treatment were the order of the day.

Jimmy ended up on the diamond mines of Kolmanshoop, Pomona and Luderitz. It was in 1918 that Jimmy la Guma first rose to prominence in leading a strike at the diamond diggings in Pomona in the German colony. As a result, he was kicked off the diamond diggings and could only get a job on the tugs at Luderitz harbour.

Here he was recruited by Clements Kadalie to start a branch of the ICU. In 1919, at the age of 27, Jimmy la Guma returned to Cape Town to take up a full-time position in the ICU. He was to become the Assistant General Secretary and the Manager of the ICU newspaper, *The Workers Herald*. In 1923 La Guma married Wilhelmina Alexander, the daughter of a carpenter who was active in the African Peoples’ Organisation (APO). They were to have a son Alex and a daughter Joan. Minnie stood by Jimmy’s side through thick and thin and endured the sacrifices they had to make.

In 1924 Jimmy la Guma joined the CPSA and in 1927 he was also elected secretary of the Cape Town branch of the ANC. The following year he became the ANC secretary for the Western Cape. At that time the ANC membership was open to Coloured people as fellow Africans. The thinking in the ANC changed between 1945 and 1959, when Coloured people were

gradually excluded from membership and began to be labelled as a non-African minority by narrow ethno-nationalists. In 1927 Jimmy travelled to Brussels to attend the conference of the League Against Imperialism and later in the same year he first travelled to the Soviet Union.

During the Great Depression Jimmy la Guma assisted in the organisation of unemployed workers, and in 1933 helped to organise the garment workers of the Cape. He served a term of imprisonment arising out of a strike by these workers. In 1935 Jimmy la Guma was a co-founder of the National Liberation League. He was also co-founder of the Non-European United Front and parallel to this tried to revive the APO in 1940. In 1953 when Reg September became General Secretary of the South African Coloured People's Organisation, his mentor Jimmy la Guma became its President. The SACPO was the revival of the APO in everything but name.

While there is so much more to this remarkable man, here I am simply giving a brief pen picture of James la Guma up to the time that Reg September met him and joined the National Liberation League. In July 1961, at the age of 67, Jimmy la Guma, died at Groote Schuur Hospital where he had been undergoing treatment for a heart ailment.

John Stephen Gomas⁶ was born in 1901 at the Abottsdale mission station in the Cape, to David and Elizabeth Gomas. His mother escaped the abuse by her farm labourer husband, and single handed she raised Johnny Gomas at a place called Malay Camp in Kimberley. Though he enjoyed studying, Johnny was forced to leave school to find a job due to poverty. Later in life Johnny took up residence in District Six.

In 1915 he was apprenticed to a tailoring company called Gordons - a company in Kimberley. His employer was an immigrant Russian Jew who

⁶ Musson D; *"Johnny Gomas, voice of the working class : a political biography"*; Buchu Books; Cape Town; (1989)

introduced Johnny to socialist ideas. In 1919 the International Socialist League (ISL) organised two unions in Kimberley – the Clothing Workers' Industrial Union and the Horse Drivers' Union. These were largely made up of Coloured workers. Johnny Gomas joined the Clothing Workers' Industrial Union, and he became a member of the ISL. He also joined the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) of Clements Kadalie.

Johnny Gomas joined the African National Congress and in 1928 he was elected Vice President of the Western Cape ANC and represented the Western Cape at the Bloemfontein Conference in 1930. By then he was a tailor by profession and a member of the Garment Workers' Union, but first and foremost Johnny's passion was the Communist Party which both he and Jimmy la Guma joined in 1924. From this point on the two men's lives continuously intersected.

Johnny served as secretary of the Cape Town branch of the Communist Party of South Africa in the late 1920s and was elected to the CPSA Polit Bureau in 1933. He was also the Western Cape provincial secretary of the ICU until December 1926, after which he was expelled when Clements Kadalie carried out a purge of communists.

Johnny Gomas like Jimmy la Guma was also a co-founder of the Non-European United Front in the 1930s. At the time he was furthermore secretary of the Tin Workers Union and of the Chemical Workers Union. During this time Johnny Gomas and Jimmy la Guma together with Ray Alexander and others, set up many trades unions in numerous industries, including the timber, quarrying, stevedoring, petroleum, railways and harbours, textile, tobacco, clothing, commercial workers, and paint industries. The list goes on to include the soap and candle, flour milling, laundry and dyers, engineering, food and canning, fishing, and building industries. The trio were the bedrock organisers and founders of what would

become the strong black trades union movement, and after finishing his schooling and going into factory work it was through these personalities that Reg September became a trades unionist. It is through their influence and assistance that Reg September entered the world of trades unionism in his early working life.

In 1935 Johnny Gomas was a co-founder of the NNL. Throughout his life he was at the centre of organisational development for the APO, ICU, CPSA, NLL, Non-European United Front right through to his joining the South African Coloured Peoples's Congress.

Again, I must state that there is much more to this great man, both before the formation of the NLL and afterwards, but at this point in time I am simply conveying the story of Johnny Gomas up to the young Reg September's first interface with him and his influences.

John Gomas, like James la Guma was among the many detained during the 1960 State of Emergency was declared. In 1979 at the age of 78 Johnny Gomas passed away in Cape Town, just at the time when a new and invigorated popular push against the Apartheid state took a giant leap forward.

It is pertinent to note that It was Jimmy la Guma and Johnny Gomas who recruited a young radical Latvian immigrant, Ray Alexander, into the CPSA only six days after she arrived on a ship in Cape Town harbour. Ray was one of two women leaders who profoundly influenced Reg September's early political life – the other being Cissie Gool.

Zainunissa "Cissie" Gool⁷, was a woman of action who walked the talk in taking up the struggle. Her podium was often up on the back of a truck, or on a step up from the pavement on a street corner, or at the head of a

⁷ Van Wyk C, Dhansy, Pampalli: "Cissie Gool"; Maskew Miller Longman; (South Africa; (2008).

throng of marchers as she encouraged her people to stand up and claim what was rightfully theirs. People likened her to Saint Joan of Arc.

She once said, ‘Don’t watch the experiment – join the struggle – it’s yours, it’s mine, it’s ours. We shall resist.’ From her childhood she had been exposed to politics and in all her 66 years she was not one to back down from a fight – particularly if it was in the cause of justice. Nothing stood in her way – least of all the boundaries of her time, which relegated a woman to the role of cook, cleaner and child rearing.

Cissie was born in 1897 and her early introduction to politics was through her mother, Nellie James, a Scottish socialist, and founding president of the APO Women’s Guild, and her father, Dr Abdullah Abdurahman, a medical doctor, founding member and a long-time president of the African People’s Organisation (APO) formed in 1902.

The Kimberley African League in the 1880s and the African Political Organisation in 1902 (later renamed African People’s Organisation), were the first political organisations to use the term African to describe themselves. Their members were largely the descendants of African-Asian enslaved people, non-European migrants – often indentured labourers, and indigene Khoe, whom colonial bureaucrats labelled as Coloured from 1911.

Alice Alexander Kinloch was a Coloured woman from the radical Kimberley political tradition who had an exceptional African consciousness for her time. She went to London and together with Advocate Henry Sylvester Williams of the African diaspora in Trinidad, in 1898 co-founded the first global Pan African Association which played an instrumental part in founding the African People’s Organisation in 1902 in Cape Town. Williams was the first black advocate to serve at the Cape Bar.

Cissie’s father, Dr Abdurahman became the first non-European to be elected to the Cape Town City Council, and was also a member of the Cape

Provincial Council from 1914 until his death in 1940. In all these years he championed the interests of the poor working people of Cape Town and opposed segregation, white domination, and racism.

As time progressed, Dr Abdurahman's style of politics faded in the face of a younger and more forceful generation who went way beyond gentlemanly sparring, campaigning, and petitioning within the confines of the colonial political framework. His daughter Cissie was at the head of this new generation.

Cissie Abdurahman had a rich heritage tapestry, including Indian, Southeast Asian, and Scottish roots. Her great-grandfather rose up from slavery to purchase both his and his wife Betsy's freedom from slavery. The couple then worked hard to establish a little business together, which became a success. It was a fruiterer's shop on the corner of Roeland and Hope Streets in Cape Town. – Betsy Fruiterers. In the fourth generation Cissie Abdurahman Gool would make history as being the first non-European woman to gain a master's degree at the University of Cape Town and in the latter years of her life she also attained a law degree at UCT.

Cissie's mother Nellie played a strong role in her political development, and it is from her mother that she got her early socialist development and mentorship. Her mother served on the Cape Town and Wynberg General Board of Aid, the Ratepayer's Association, the Women's Municipal Association, the Women's Enfranchisement League and later, on the National Liberation League Finance Committee. Nellie Abdurahman was passionate about equality in education and social justice. Furthermore, she was the founding President of the APO Women's Guild in 1909 – a body overlooked by most historians.

Within two years of Nellie Abdurahman started the APO Women's Guild in her home, and it grew to have over 70 branches. Nellie was highly

active in broader politics, particularly in the advancement of education, and in 1928 she was nominated to serve on the city council, but was not elected. Nellie was also highly active in the women's suffrage movement alongside Olive Schreiner.

It was thus her mother's influence as a female activist and president of the APO Women's Guild that led to Cissie associating herself with the APO in the 1920s and writing a women's column for its newspaper.

In 1919 Cissie married Dr Abdul Hamid Gool, then active in South African Indian politics, and also a member of the APO. Abdul and Cissie were to have three children in their 14-year marriage – Rustum, Marcina and Shaheen. Throughout her marriage and motherhood, Cissie persevered with her studies. In 1936, Cissie Gool separated from Dr Abdul Gool, leaving him to cohabit with Sam Kahn, a move that many saw as scandalous. The Gools were formally divorced in 1942. Sam Kahn was a Jewish communist who later served as a City Councillor and who in 1948 was elected to parliament as the representative for Natives.

Cissie Gool joined the Communist Party of South Africa in 1933, after being introduced to it by Ray Alexander, Jimmy la Guma, and Johnny Gomas. At a time when the CPSA was being completely reshaped, Cissie served on the Polit Bureau, which was the executive committee of the CPSA. Cissie remained in the CPSA until its dissolution and when it re-emerged as the underground South African Communist Party, she became an underground member of the redefined SACP. In the late 1930s Reg September after joining the NLL began to engage with Cissie Gool and she became a major influence on his life.

Cissie Gool would become a powerful force in united front politics trying to bring unity in the highly factional politics of Cape Town, but this did not mean that she did not engage in a deep critique of the analysis and ideological

rigidity of the radical-left in the political spectrum. While there were many complexities in the overlap of family and ideological politics, the Gools and Abdurahmans had a deep love for their people and a deep and passionate sense of social responsibility. This is sometimes overshadowed by the political story and its petty-antagonisms. Reg was at the receiving end of much pain suffered as a result of antagonistic political conflicts and personal attacks. In his recordings and transcriptions this comes out strongly.

In celebrating the historical contributions in the political arena, it is important to appreciate all of our trail blazing political forbears across partisan lines, because regardless of differences, that have to be aired, they are all part of our heritage. Perpetuating conflict in perpetuity serves no purpose. Though making his own sharp critique of others in the context of the times, the need to avoid personal attacks was something that Reg in his later life spoke more about and appealed that it be brought to an end and not passed to future generations.

Dr Abdul Gool was deeply and passionately involved in the politics of the South African Indian Congress. Cissie's brothers-in-law, Goolam Gool and Jainab Gool, were leading proponents of the Trotskyite Workers' Party of South Africa and although it was tough going, Cissie engaged in cooperative political endeavours with them between 1935 and 1942 because of her passionate belief in promoting a united left front.

With the emergence of the Non-European Unity Movement with Goolam Gool, Jane Gool and I B Tabata leading its thrust, Cissie Gool parted ways with their narrower concept of "ideological purism as the only basis for unity". She believed this was effectively schismatic and divisive – a contradiction to "unity". Her strategy to unite a broad front, not on ideological grounds, but on a broad common-interest focus, was a more attainable and less elitist unity.

As a result of his personal experiences in the 1950s and 1960s, Reg September was more critical and less accommodating of the radical—left politics of Cape Town. He saw this as a self-indulgent trendy middle-class tendency, resplendent with flowery political oratory and theories, that created organisational devastation and political mayhem wherever it raised its head. He felt that as repression was on the increase it also unwittingly became the perfect cover for agente-provateurs of the regime and US and British security agencies to cause mischief and get vital information from loose lips to use against others.

Cissie Gool's political standard was to build unity and focus on key issues of concern to the majority of black working people, and extend this unity to include other class forces and formations which shared an interest in halting the progress of the neo-Nazi path down which the South African government was rapidly going. The ultra-radical and schismatic approach of some of her initial allies dogged her every move. Cissie, however, became adept at disarming people with this tendency, and still managed to draw in diverse opponents of South Africa's rising "new right". It did leave her open to criticism, from both the vociferous Workers' Party of South Africa and sometimes from some in her own South African Communist Party, of "ideological incorrectness".

Cissie's was a liberated woman's voice and the voice of the voiceless underclasses. After her first major public address on women's enfranchisement in 1930, protesting the fact that only white women had won enfranchisement, Cissie Gool found that she had a public voice, the voice of an orator, which appealed to the people. What made Cissie different to many others in politics was also first demonstrated at this meeting. She got to a point in her speech when she said, 'Talk is not good enough', and urged the

people to follow her. She promptly led them in an unplanned march to parliament to confront Herzog and his ministers.

On 1 December 1935, celebrated as the Day of Emancipation from Slavery, Cissie Gool launched the National Liberation League (NLL) and became its first president. At the launch it was explained that the NLL was a united front movement which called for a political alliance of all the oppressed against the common enemy, the “European capitalist imperialist”. It adopted as its emblem a black slave with severed chains, holding aloft a flaming torch, with the slogan “For equality, land and freedom”.

This was the first and only time that the slavery roots of the people of Cape Town was used in a significant manner in politics and it was a proud moment in that this was one of the most important formations in South African history and was the foundation of a movement for National Liberation. This moment built on the foundation of the 1808 Slave Revolt led by Louis van Mauritius and Abraham van der Kaap - South Africa’s own red October of that year. The revolt involving 326 rebels ended with South Africa’s largest treason trial ever and the execution of Louis and the other leaders. One hundred and fifty-five years later the second largest treason trial in our history occurred, and Reg September was among 156 activists who were put on trial.

The symbolism of the NLL drawing on liberation from slavery and giving it greater meaning in the broader liberation struggle was powerfully attractive to the young Reg September. Cissie was instrumental in its foundation, and she was elected as president of the National Liberation League championing the cause of land, equality, and freedom.

The formation of the NLL marked a clear break with the traditional moderate liberal framework, which until then had dominated resistance politics in the Cape. This changed the political paradigm of resistance

politics in the Western Cape and eclipsed the ICU and APO as the previous dominant forces, which were now in rapid decline. It would set the path of the national liberation struggle for the next 60 years. These unfolding events deeply influenced the CPSA across the country and it also impacted the ANC, whose Youth League established in 1944 radically transformed the organisation in 1949.

A second turning point in South African politics that has already been raised and that also had Cissie Gool as a driving force at its centre, was the introduction of the political concept of an “Alliance” or “United Front”. The united front concept arose in the Spanish resistance and more sharply in Nazi Germany and in the European countries most threatened by German expansion. It found its clearest articulation in the ideas of Georgi Dimitrov. At the 7th Comintern in Moscow in 1935, Dimitrov, a Bulgarian, expounded on the need for a united global anti-fascist front, and this became official party policy. The CPSA was to put maximum effort into the NLL, the All-African Convention, and the ANC, with the aim of building a broad united front. This concept would play a major role in the 1950s and again in the 1980s and would remain a dominant feature in South African politics right into the 21st century.

In 1938, Cissy Gool was elected as president of the Non-European United Front (NEUF), formed to coordinate organisations into an anti-imperialist liberation front that brought a range of organisations together, seeking to bring “Coloured”, Indian and indigene African political formations under a common umbrella. In 1943 Cissy Gool also became a national executive member of the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department Organisation (anti-CAD). Thereafter she served on the leadership of the Cape Passive Resistance Council and in the 1950s on the Franchise Action Council, together with the young man she mentored – Reg September.

Cissie's was a remarkable woman's political touch in Reg September's formative political years that cannot be over-emphasised. She helped Reg tremendously in navigating the splintered political terrain of Cape Town. Cissie's ability to bridge the worlds across the divides helped Reg navigate these differences too. There is so much more to Cissie Gool and her influence on the South African political scene particularly in the 1940s and 1950s, but here the focus has been on this influence on Reg September when joining the NLL.

In 1963, Cissie suffered a sudden stroke and passed away. She was buried in the Muslim cemetery in Salt River, next to her father. As with her father, the people of Cape Town turned out in a massive display of tribute at her passing.

Ray Alexander⁸ arrived in Cape Town in November 1929, as a 15-year-old Latvian girl. Rochella Ester Alexandrowich would become known to all as Ray Alexander. Ray was born on 31 December 1913 and grew up in Varklian, which was a small town in Latgale province in Latvia, then part of the Russian Tsarist Empire. In South Africa she became the legendary Ray Alexander even though she once also had the married name Weinberg, and later, the married name Simons, when she was married a second time to her lifelong "companero", Jack Simons – "Commissar Jack". After a fellow worker at Tru Brothers department store found her long Latvian name a bit of a mouthful, Rochella was called Ray for the first time, and the name stuck. By the 1980s she was fondly called Aunty Ray.

Her journey as a young girl to South Africa was via Lithuania, Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, England, Las Palmas, and Walvis Bay. She arrived in Cape Town on the ship Ubena on 5 November 1929, where her

⁸ Simons RE; (edt) Suttner R; *"All My Life and All My Strength"*; STE Publishers; (2004)

new home was to be at 74 Roeland Street, Cape Town where she had joined relatives who had come earlier to Cape Town.

On 6 November 1929, the day after she had arrived in Cape Town from Latvia, Ray was so disappointed that in Cape Town there was to be no celebration of the Russian Revolution on 7 November, that she immediately went down to the docks to make arrangements with some sailors to take her back home. She was so distraught that she cried herself to sleep that night.

On the afternoon of 8 November 1929, Ray got to talking to some furniture, leather and laundry workers who were streaming out from their day's work at the factories down in Roeland Street. She found out that they were not unionised and in her own words she thought that 'this is virgin soil'. Ray said it was this that made her make up her mind to stay on in South Africa and organise workers. The trades union struggle became her lifelong mission, which she tackled with passion for all of her days, to the end of her life in 2004 at the age of 91.

A few days after that key decision, she attended a district meeting of the Communist Party of South Africa where Joe Pick was the secretary and Johnny Gomas the organiser. When they asked her to be the secretary of the Cape Town branch of the party she told them, in what many would learn to be her straight-forward style, 'I'm not yet 16 and the position of secretary should go to one of the local people and not a foreigner.'

A month after her arrival, Ray lost her first job at Bragins dress shop in Adderley Street when the manager fired her for 'walking with the shvartzers – the blacks – as it was not good for business'. This was after Ray had joined a lunch time demonstration, marching at the side of Johnny Gomas, Jimmy la Guma, James Shuba, Josiah Ngedlane, Elliot Tonjeni and Bransby Ndobe at the head of a march where an effigy of the neo-fascist Minister of Justice, Oswald Pirow, was burned. This was the start of Ray Alexander's life-long

engagement with the anti-colonial struggle for national liberation in South Africa, another of the driving passions in her life.

Apart from the trades union struggle and the black struggle for national liberation, Ray had two other driving passions – one was her firm belief in socialism and the driving force of the Russian Revolution, and the championing of the rights of women was the other. A story which illustrates these facets of her life, involves how she first met Cape Town's own outstanding female revolutionary, Cissie Gool, the other early woman leader who influenced Reg September. The incident also occurred only days after she first arrived in Cape Town.

The occasion was when Johnny Gomas had taken Ray Alexander to a public meeting at the City Hall where Sarojini Naidu, a visiting leader of the Indian National Congress from India was giving an address on the worldwide women's movement for emancipation and the right to vote and stand for government. Cissie Gool, who had become well known for her fiery spirit in politics, was chairing the meeting. During question time Ray Alexander stood up to make a point. She said, 'I'm very grateful for that wonderful speech, but the one thing you left out was the 1917 Russian Revolution when the women in Russia got the vote, which encouraged other women in Europe to conduct the same struggle.' This gave Ray the further opportunity to attack the new law in South Africa which gave only white women the vote. She argued that the people of South Africa must fight for all women to be able to vote, as in Russia. She was met with great applause, invited to the platform and afterwards to a party at Cissie Gool's home.

From that time on Ray was a regular visitor at the home of Cissie Gool and of her mother, Nellie Abdurahman. Through Ray Alexander, Cissie Gool, who was almost twice her age, was drawn into the Communist Party and later became an executive member in the Political Bureau of the party.

It was from these four foundation stones – trade unionism, national liberation, socialism, and the struggle for women’s rights that Ray built a formidable platform of struggle and influenced many generations of fighters for freedom in South Africa.

A fifth foundation stone in Ray Alexander’s life was her mastery of underground resistance work. Ray Alexander’s period of training in the communist underground in Riga stood her in good stead when the period of repression began in South Africa after 1948 and left activists, trades unionists and ANC leaders were forced to go underground and take up the armed struggle. Her tenacity and ability to deal with the hardships that were to come with underground activity and exile were invaluable attributes.

The early years of Rochella’s life had been filled with tension as her town was caught up in occupation by the German army during World War I and then occupied by the anti-communist White Russian forces during the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution. Her family had Bolshevik sympathies and hid Red Army soldiers in an occupied town where many communists were killed by the White Army. As a Jewish family the Alexandrowich family were also affected by the virulent anti-Semitic climate in Latvia and subject to attacks simply for being Jews.

Leibe Yoffe, a leading communist, was a family friend and frequent visitor to the Alexandrowich home, as were many others who spoke Russian, German and English, and thus Rochelle also discovered her knack for languages. Leibe Yoffe mentored and tutored her after her father died when she was 12 and got her out to Riga. There she got involved in the communist underground movement where cadres trained her in clandestine and military resistance tactics and propaganda development and distribution. She would later pass on these skills to many comrades in the South African resistance,

who trained as Umkhonto we Sizwe cadres after the adoption of the armed struggle in the 1960s.

As young as she was, Ray participated in getting various workers' initiatives off the ground, such as the Workers' Club, later called the People's Club, which became a centre for left intellectual development. Then there was also the Workers' Shield – Ikaka Laba Sebenzi – to assist political prisoners and to fight against all forms of racist oppression, and affiliated to the International Labour Defence Organisation. Together with her sister Dora Alexander and others she also participated in the establishment of the Friends of the Soviet Union.

Another project started at this time was the CPSA left newspaper Umsebenzi – “The South African Worker”. She was instrumental in establishing a fully-fledged CPSA office at 22 Hanover Street in District Six where Johnny Gomas and Eddie Roux also conducted study classes. This was the same office where a few years later the young schoolboy Reg September would get his induction into the political world by Kotane, Gomas and Jimmy la Guma.

Throughout this period Ray had many brushes with the law because she was so highly active in getting new unions started. By 1933 Ray had further engaged in taking the CPSA and union organisations to workers on the desolate emergent Cape Flats townships and teamed up with CPSA leader J B Marks from Johannesburg when he came to Cape Town to assist in party organisational work. Ray Alexander also became secretary of the Commercial Employees' Union, which was the motivating union for the establishment of the Anti-Fascist League in 1935, the sister organisation of the NLL.

In December 1932, Ray experienced her first arrest, along with fellow communist Douglas Wolton, for inciting the tram and bus workers to strike for a pay rise from one shilling and sixpence to two shillings per hour. The

strike had lasted for 10 days and had a crippling effect on Cape Town's public transport before being busted by the strong-arm tactics of the police. The trial that followed resulted in Ray being sentenced to one month suspended for two years – her first experience of restrictions in South Africa.

Ray also put her underground training to use in those first few years in Cape Town. She assisted in getting Moses Kotane, code name Khumalo, out of South Africa by ship, to study at the Moscow Lenin School in 1931. Moses Kotane, “Khumalo”, became the General Secretary of the CPSA seven years later. Ray always operated on the principle that the left struggle had to be conducted at a parallel clandestine level, at least in part, because the left would inevitably face persecution by right wing and capitalist forces.

It was during this period too that the Nazis came to power in Germany and that Spain drifted towards civil war while Europe lurched towards fascist control. This was when Johnny Gomas, James la Guma, Cissie Gool, and other comrades in the CPSA, joined by other left organisations, took the initiative to establish the National Liberation League and the Anti-Fascist League to oppose fascism in Europe and the growth of fascist organisations in South Africa. These new organisations on the left also built support for the Spanish Republic and the emerging anti-fascist and anti-Nazi resistance movements in Europe.

Ray Alexander's introduction into activism in Cape Town was also an introduction to the local communist party. At the time the CPSA was in turmoil, undergoing transformation from a small organisation with a predominantly white membership, preoccupied with white labour issues, into an organisation which focused on the issues of the black majority working-class. Ray Alexander stood out as being among the very few whites at the time who could fully understand and articulate that the struggle in South Africa had to be led by the oppressed non-European majority.

She aligned with Moses Kotane, James la Guma, Johnny Gomas, and Cissie Gool who were highly influenced by the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov, a proponent of the “United Front” concept. They committed themselves to building a South African “United Front” and formed the All-in Africa Conference in opposition to the Native Land Trust Bill. Thirty-five organisations were to come together in a united front called the “People’s Front” in 1936.

She also introduced a revolutionary new approach to trades unionism, which broke the mould of syndicalist craft and general workers unions, introducing the concept of political industrial trades unionism to the South African labour landscape.

In 1938 the CPSA took a decision to temporarily move its executive to Cape Town and by that time Cissie Gool along with Ray Alexander, Jack Simons, Sam Kahn, Johnny Gomas, and James la Guma were on the executive known as the Political Bureau, along with Bill Andrews as Chairman and Moses Kotane as General Secretary.

As an illustration of Ray Alexander’s character, when Josef Stalin took the Soviet Union into a pact with Hitler’s Germany and it became a divisive issue in the CPSA, Ray was prepared to express herself differently to those who simply towed a line. The pact posed a huge contradiction for Ray Alexander and her closest comrades. The Polit Bureau of the CPSA was split on this issue and leading communist Harry Snitcher demanded that action be taken against Ray Alexander for talking against the pact and warning of its dangers. Ray in later years expressed that she was against the pact because it was going to lead to confusion because all the time, they had been denouncing the Fascists and Nazis and, now the Soviet Union was making a pact with them. She said that she was straightforward in asking the comrades not to expect her to speak in support of that platform.

Ray stuck to her position that this was a wrong move and indeed, it proved to be one. An about-turn was necessary when Hitler's Nazis attacked the Soviet Union. People in the CPSA and outside the party found a new respect for Ray as an independent minded person. Ray was an amazing young woman – a thought-leader, full of energy and passion which never abated. Such was the respect that she commanded within the party that regardless of its official view, no action was taken against Ray, whose analysis had been proved to be correct.

Ray was the youngest of the pioneer political influencers in Reg September's life when he entered the political orbit of the NLL and its founders. His entire early political and trades union grounding was laid over five short years from 1938 to 1943. It was Ray that initiated Reg into the importance of industrial trades unionism. Reg September proved to be a quick learner. His factory-based apprenticeship to become an artisan gave way to an apprenticeship in trades unionism and politics, and he had the best teacher in the world. His fondness for Ray and hers for Reg was lifelong. At the All-in Conference of Non-European Trades Unions driven by Ray Alexander, which saw the largest gathering of this type in 1945, Reg September was by her side. Ray revolutionised trades unionism in South Africa and brought the trades unions into the political arena and into the struggle for national liberation. She was also the driving force behind the establishment of the South African Congress of Trades Unions in 1955 pioneering the Alliance of the ANC, SACP and SACTU, and from 1985, COSATU.

She had stood for Parliament and won her seat in 1954 as a Native Representative, but was not allowed to take her seat because she was a communist. She was actually pushed down the steps of Parliament when evicted. It would take a few volumes to recount and discuss Ray's life, but

here again the purpose in this book is to have introduced her life up to Reg having come under her mentorship. Ray Alexander Simons passed away in September 2004.

Dr Goolam Gool⁹, who was a physician, member of the All-African Convention committee, member of the NLL executive, founder of the anti-CAD and Vice President of the Non-European Unity Movement is the sixth of those who were political influences on Reg September in the years of transition from high school student to young worker and trades union activist.

Goolam Gool was born on 24 March 1905, in Cape Town, the son of Yusuf Gool from India and a local woman, Wagieda Ta'al. Goolam was sent to study at Aligarh College in India at the age of 9 and returned home in 1919. He was then sent to London to complete his schooling and on to Guy's Medical Training Hospital, London in 1923 to qualify as a medical doctor in 1931. When he returned to South Africa, he set up a medical practice in District Six with his brother, Dr A H Gool. They later moved the practice to Claremont, which was Reg September's childhood area.

While in London he married Marceda Ismael, a fellow medical student from Cape Town just before they both returned home. They were later divorced, whereafter married Halima Nagdee.

Although Goolam, having been outside of South Africa for most of his life and having a poor understanding of the political conditions, on returning

⁹ SAHO; "Goolam H. Gool"; SA History Online; Biographies; <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/goolam-h-gool> Read with...Hirson B; Profiles of some South African Trotskyists" Encyclopedia of Trotskyism On-Line: Revolutionary History: Volume 4, No. 4, South Africa; (2009)... read with...Solomons C; "Reading the Voices of a Fractured Coloured Elite: Coloured Intellectuals and Newspapers in the Cape, c. 1959-1966"; MA Thesis Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University; Cape Town; (2022)

to South Africa had political ambitions. He initially aimed to be Dr Abdurahman's successor in the APO.

Reg who initially idolised Goolam said that as he grew older and came to really know Goolam, found he was not someone prepared to learn from others and his entry into politics was sectarian and like a bull in a porcelain shop.

Goolam was Cissie Gool's brother-in-law and quickly became a leading personality in the politics of the 1930s to 1950s. He was a Trotskyite and a founding member of the executive committee of the All-African Convention and also of the National Liberation League in 1935, but in 1938 he was expelled. In 1943 he was a founder of the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department Movement (Anti-CAD). When the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) was established, he was elected its vice-chairman; a position which he held until his passing in 1962.

The Non-European Unity Movement had been established in 1943 to oppose the establishment of a Coloured Affairs Department by the United National Party of Jan Smuts.

NEUM was a Trotskyite platform, which adopted a 10-point programme that included equal franchise, free and equal education, the redistribution of land and the eradication of discriminatory labour laws.

Goolam Gool was its ideological leader; he followed fairly high-brow Trotskyite theories, advocating permanent revolution on the part of the proletariat (working class), which his CPSA opponents believed to be out of touch with reality not least of all being the fact that as a professional doctor running his own business, he neither had a working-class following nor any foothold among working class-communities.

According to Reg, Goolam was pretty far removed from working-class people and without any practical experience on the ground. Reg pegged him

as a “*humanitarian fellow*” who, as a doctor, lived in a doctor–patient paradigm when it came to working people, and who had an almost philanthropic view from afar. But then contradictorily he had the most radical sounding revolutionary politics framed as being the only true politics of the proletariat.

His humanitarian care for real people with real faces and real problems was as far as he interacted with their world. In the political boxing ring of his mind, the real people and their living conditions became lost as they became the faceless mass called the proletariat. As time progressed, Reg found Goolam’s way of talking more and more alien and out of touch with the man in the street. But it was not always so.

There was a time that Reg, as a child, idolised Dr Goolam Gool, and this is important to mention in the context of this chapter as Dr Gool was also one of Reg September’s early mentors and guides. He was after all, a local doctor to whom people looked for guidance.

According to Reg, Goolam’s politics were abstract and very much attuned to European ultra–leftist thinking. It was miles away from the thinking of Kotane, La Guma, and Gomas, who had at that time been learning their politics working at the bottom of the woodpile in the tough working–class environments of Africa – mines, docks, and factories.

Dr Goolam Gool was not a good listener and observer, and this ultimately resulted in bad chemistry with colleagues. Reg September came to view Dr Gool as having a textbook orientation to politics. He promoted and defended a Trotskyite approach with its fractured sectarianism and imported it into South Africa to an attentive tiny middle–class arena, where orators with novel ideas become stars on a spotlighted stage. From this Reg would simply say, “*Alas poor Goolam is locked into what Lenin referred to as left–wing*

childishness” (in his works ‘Left-wing childishness and the petty-bourgeois mentality’ and ‘Left-wing Communism – An infantile disorder’).

Reg expressed that much of this type of politics was over the heads of most working-class people. Effectively Goolam was seen as being in the same mould of those whose actions resulted in the disintegration of the CPSA in the 1920s and early 1930s. Unlike the others in the NLL, he had not gone through the fires of the terrible working-class activist experiences that ultimately led to the loss of lives. He found himself the odd man within the NLL leadership group. He also developed a vindictive antagonism not only to the fellow executives for questioning him, he also then seems to have set out to destroy the NLL.

Reg indicated that even within Gool’s own family there was much conflict between himself and the two other political poles in that family. He said that Goolam believed that there was no place in left-politics for tactics and compromise. Reg elaborated that in Dr Gool’s approach, most others in resistance politics in South Africa were on a reformist trajectory and were out of kilter with the revolutionary approach. Gool would not taint himself by working within any reformist structure, which he declared was a betrayal of the revolution and the proletariat.

Effectively this ruled out trades unions because they are by nature reformist, but in particular it involved not only making demands and but negotiating which inevitably involved compromises. Goolam’s dismissive approach conflicted with the view of the CPSA, that any space that afforded itself should become nurtured space for moving the struggle forward.

In practice, boycott and challenge became the cornerstones of anything that Goolam Gool involved himself in. His father-in-law was seen as a compromised and tired ‘Old Guard’ and his sister-in-law, Cissie Gool, was seen as captured by the Stalinists, who were also seen as reform-minded.

Dr Goolam Gool sincerely believed that his was a principled stand and that what others in the left were doing was unprincipled and needed to be disrupted at every turn, even when they were opposing the onslaught by the regime and paid heavy prices for their stand. Reg would say that for Goolam, disrupting the CPSA, the ANC and trades unions and their activities as a revolutionary mission, became an obsession. Sometimes his disruption approach would compromise the safety of others up against a vicious system, and would compromise the success of complex tactics used against the state.

Reg further explained his relationship with Gool: *I became acquainted with Dr Goolam Gool when I was about sixteen years of age.*

Achmat Osman and I were friends and we visited Goolam and Halima at their home in Constantia Road from time to time. Goolam was a very warm and hospitable man.

My recollection of Halima was that of a person somewhat more formal. We talked a great deal, and I found his ideas appealing and interesting. His global experience and how well read he was, particularly with left literature was admirable. It was a period when there were a few discussion groups cum study groups, most of which were Trotskyite inclined and dominated by those in the professions and had higher education.

I accompanied Goolam on a few occasions. There were a range of study clubs – the Lenin Club, the October Club, The Fourth International Club, the New Era Fellowship, the People’s Club and so on; and of course, there was the Hyman Liberman Institute.

The big problem with these clubs was the preoccupation on both sides of the Trotskyite and Stalinist divide with their somewhat self-indulgent preoccupation with European left politics. It was mutually destructive but also confusing and destructive to working-class people who were painstakingly trying to build real

African working-class organisations on the ground – of those called ‘Native’ and ‘Coloureds’.

Goolam was very territorial. I remember going to one club one day – possibly it was the celebration of May Day or the Russian Revolution and heard Eddie Roux calling out to Goolam half-jocularly – “What are you doing here Goolam?”

It was a period in my history when the more privileged sections of the ‘Coloured’ community were caught up in a very confused political fever with much self-indulgence in superficial politics. But it was as a result of being shunted from all sides by – segregation, discrimination in apprenticeships, trades unions, the education arena, removals [from] areas in which they lived; the heat was being turned up.

But there was an inward-looking approach overly pre-occupied with Coloured affairs whereas significantly worse experiences were happening to those called Natives with no practical reaching out, even although there was some interaction between a tiny section the “intelligentsia” on both sides of the divide.

Reg further elaborated his hurt and disillusionment with his relationship with this early mentor:

Little did I realise at the time the extent of the disagreement and sharp differences of opinion being waged between Trotskyites and so-called Stalinists during my late teens and in the National Liberation League which I looked up to for inspiration and guidance.

One day I would be happily in the company of Goolam and friends, and the next day in the company of Jimmy la Guma and Moses Kotane. I believe that I had a particularly special affection for Goolam Gool, and it was a terrible turning point for me one day when disillusionment hit me in the face after an almost childish expression of mischief-making by Goolam was brought home to me.

Goolam, I learnt with hindsight, had been particularly disruptive within the NLL and was ultimately expelled from the leadership. He had been spending more

time attacking and undermining other members, based on his notion of being a 'principled revolutionary' who opposed reformism.

One Sunday morning while I was walking down the street near my home, Goolam pulled up in his car and called me at the top of his voice. He was exceptionally happy. He said, "Reggie, we have smashed the League."

I associated "Smashing the League" to be something that would be the aim of our enemies, the regime, and not one of our own. The NLL meant everything to me, and I was a boy in my teens and here was a grown-up man, a doctor and intellectual, and a leader of the Trotskyite school of thought that was proudly telling me that he had smashed the League. I was devastated.

That was when I lost respect for someone I looked up to. It was very hurtful but with hindsight I should be grateful that I was able to sort out such basic issues at such a tender age.

What this type of mischief unfortunately did was to make many afraid of disagreements in discourse because they believed that it would cause division and mayhem in organisation. It is vital to any organisation and the advancement of ideas that people do at times disagree, but in a disciplined and constructive manner, no matter how robust the debate. Those early sometimes mindless and mischievous actions would have a long-term effect of eroding thorough in-depth debate and many out-of-the-box thinkers would be jettisoned and that ultimately hurt organisations and impeded the development of our organisations.

Reg could see the positive and the negative, very much like Johnny Gomas could do, and believed that positives and negatives could result from any event. He could see the growth of a siege or laager mentality pervading political organisations, which ultimately didn't just fall away when we became free after 1994 and embraced democracy and a constitutional order. Gomas, la Guma, Kotane, Cissie Gool and Ray Alexander were all people that were not "yes-men or yes-women". They believed in debate and were

not fearful of speaking their minds even if it went against the flow of the stream. This impressed Reg very much.

When Reg talked about the past it would often be in sage-like tones and with a touch of green (sadness). There were things that happened that should not have happened. He recalled Dr Goolam Gool with fondness in one breath and with a feeling of being personally let down in another breath; *'and for what', he would say, 'for nonsense'*. At these stages in interviews Reg would say, *'Please stop now. Enough for now.'* The emotional hurt was so deep.

These then were Reg September's baptismal years into politics, trades unionism and the struggle for national liberation. Reg would walk a long road from his boyhood into the future with these larger-than-life personalities.

By the end of World War II Reg September was in full fighting form as a cadre of the struggle and had been inducted by some of the finest minds in resistance politics and some of the most highly skilled practitioners of what they stood for – people who walked the talk.

While this chapter has focused on the influences on Reg September's life at his transition from school to the world of work, the next chapter looks at Reg's own progression through the 1940s to the cusp of the 1950s when he would be thrust into a leadership role and move into the transition from open political activity to clandestine activity; then came the push to the international front in exile.

5

From Trades Unionist to mass mobilisation

The 1940s saw Reg September equipping himself for the leadership role that he was to play in the following decade. The 1940s and 1950s were a time of mass mobilisation, through engagement with people in their homes, out in the streets, in workplaces, in community centres and wherever people gathered. People were encouraged to join organisations and to struggle for rights and political representation. They were also encouraged to attend night schools to improve their education and to attend public protests to make their voices heard. Education was important to Reg and the communists because it empowered the people and encouraged people to embrace the tools of intellectual debate. Reg September's first steps into this arena was via working in factories and becoming a trades unionist.

Communists encouraged workers to learn about the world, engage in international issues and so to understand their brothers and sisters across the world. It also empowered the people not simply to be led by fashionable radical intelligentsia squabbles and made it less easy for the articulate and well-versed middle classes to take over political leadership and platforms. Anti-intellectualism was a cornerstone of fascist movements, which led working class people over a precipice by exploiting ignorance. Ultra-leftism, Reg would explain, was in a sense the twin of fascism. It was going so far to the left that it met up with the right.

Reg argued that the best means of opposing a fascist drift or susceptibility among workers was to assist workers to develop their own intellectual capacity rather than to buy into anti-intellectualism that some advocated. The CPSA use of night schools for literacy, numeracy and further education preparedness linked education to real life experiences in society. This was very similar to later programmes like the one of Paulo Freire in Brazil, who gave a clear political framework to education for liberation – the “Pedagogy of the Oppressed”. The night school movement in Cape Town was way ahead of its time.

The first five years of the 1940s were a time when the world was at war and millions of young, working-class men and women were dying and experiencing the worst degradations, all because of the extremist ideologies of imperial powers. By the 1950s all over the world intelligence agencies were infiltrating left labour organisations and parties to sow discontent – and they employed both a far right and far left approach. South Africa was not exempt from this infiltration, mischief sowing and disruption of the fledgling socialist and trades union movement by spreading factionalism.

It was thus imperative that working-class people of colour had to develop their intellectual capacity in defence of themselves and as a means to overcome manipulation and to strive to have hegemony of working-class values over those of capitalism, which trivialises working people’s lives. It was imperative that South African working-class intellectuals could emerge to craft socialism with African characteristics in theory and praxis.

Reg always warned people that Hitler’s party was called the German Workers National “Socialist” Party (Nazi Party). This was right-wing nationalism using confused and pseudo notions of “socialist” rhetoric to bamboozle the mass of working people, who were dumbed down through years of grooming. The South African working class, non-Europeans in the

main, particularly in the context of fighting for national liberation, would in the future need to be careful of not being led down the same path as people in Spain, Italy, Germany, Argentina and elsewhere through a pandering to tribalism, colourism, ethnic narrow-nationalism, or race-hatred. The World War II years educated the working-class through a tempering by fire as to just how dangerous a cocktail of narrow-nationalism, ethnic supremacy and warped socialism for an “Uber Volk” can become.

Around the world some learnt the lessons and others unfortunately learnt the fascist behaviour. The passage of time saw people coming to understand that what panned out after the war in Eastern Europe was a terrible cocktail of some of the worst practices of two opposing sides which ultimately led to the destruction of many important socialist advances. A lack of questioning and debate allowed aberrations and atrocities to flourish.

Soon after the war ended a series of national liberation struggles arose in South Africa and many other colonies of the Europeans wanting to throw off the yoke of colonialism and imperialism. The learnings of WW2 and its impacts on post war politics was pertinent to Reg’s personal political development as what author and fellow communist Brian Bunting in a book by the same title called *‘The rise of the South African Reich’* threw its shadow over the liberationist opposition’s efforts in fighting for freedom.

Reg had transitioned from schoolboy activist into the building trade and had learnt some of the hard lessons that every working-class boy and girl learns on a building site, in a factory, on the mines, on the sea or on the farmlands. Working life is hard, repetitive, physically tiring, mentally frustrating, exploitative, and very badly paid.

From the building trade Reg went over into the shoe and leather trade as an apprentice and learnt a bit about the pecking order or strata within the working class. The lower down the rung you were, and the less qualified, the

harder you worked, for less money. The apprenticeships were lengthy, and you worked for almost no wages, with training deductions, while you learnt a trade. From Reg's perspective during a four-or-five-year apprenticeship you would have learnt to do much of the job within the first six months, so that you received less training and learnt fewer new skills while your responsibilities and production time steadily increased. The company basically did not have to pay you as much as an artisan or journeyman and thus apprenticeships, though not inherently a bad thing, in some cases became an exploitative confidence trick on working class youth.

The term 'apprenticeship' and its older history in the context of slavery and the oppression of Cape indigenous peoples is negative, but there is an immensely positive side if its framework were reformed as has occurred in some countries. The journey first over three years of learning to become a journeyman/journeywoman after passing a trade test and attaining three trades certificates, was an education, training and experience-gaining process that was hugely positive. Workplace and technical training colleges work in tandem. The system if purged of some of its questionable characteristics, and properly managed and governed so that it was not exploitative was an excellent 'on-the-job' learning experience.

Globally it is still best practice. It is a ticket out of the doldrums of unemployment or unskilled employment for otherwise unemployed or unemployable youth.

Once one moves from the three-year learnership and completes another two-year journeyman/journeywoman period alongside an artisan in service, the five-year journey would be complete and one would qualify as an artisan, giving one mobility in the world of work or even opportunity to establish oneself as an independent self-employed tradesperson. A better term than apprenticeship is simply 'cadet-artisanship'. But Reg was not enamoured by

the particular apprenticeship that he underwent because of the exploitation that he experienced. I went through two apprenticeships – one in an exploitative sweatshop environment and like Reg I found it oppressive and bailed out, – but the other was a good experience and it equipped me with skills that I otherwise would not have had.

After two years Reg packed in the apprenticeship and settled for being an unskilled cutter/clipper in a factory of J W Jagger as he was able to use the skill he had already learnt and earn better money. From J W Jagger he went on to work for Panther. He earned £6.10s per week in the shoe factory. It is from this experience of factory work that Reg ventured into the trades union arena.

Reg explained that anybody going into trades union work full time should first have to do as he did and experience the factory floor from the lowest level up. That is how one really understands what being a labourer really means and what working people live with every day. It was during this period that Reg spent part of his apprenticeship away from Cape Town and its influences, up in Durban. That period and his engagement with unionists, communists and Indian Congress and African National Congress trailblazer pioneers were another set of experiences fundamental to his growth.

To understand the world that Reg was encountering one needs to look briefly at the trades union environment at the time. Up until 1900 the labour scenario in South Africa included four phases of transition – the slavery system, the indentured labour system, the migrant labour system, and a combination of craft artisanal and apprenticeship labour. Migration from rural to urban areas, to join in wage-labouring, was forced on the rural population by poll taxes of various sorts.

Among the European population there were emergent craft unions and unionisation on mines. African workers, whether called ‘Native’ or

‘Coloured,’ had few attempts at unionisation until 1917 when the International Socialist League made an attempt to form the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA), which was later incorporated into what would become the first large general workers association of non-European workers – the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU). It was co-founded by a Malawian migrant worker by the name of Clements Kadalie together with A F Batty in 1919 from the Labour Democratic Party.

Kadalie soon created a formidable union with a mainly Coloured support base for dockworkers and railway workers. As secretary of the ICU, Clements Kadalie organised the first successful strike of 2 000 workers, which resulted in the union winning a 100 percent increase in pay. The following year Selby Msimang, who had started the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICWU) in Bloemfontein, invited Clements Kadalie and his union to merge, and the two became the ICWU of Africa with Kadalie at its head.

However, the union was still just known as the ICU and by 1927 it had branches all over South Africa. Between 1924 and 1927 its membership rose from 30 000 workers to over 100 000 workers.

Ultimately bowing to pressures from the British Labour Party and British Trades Union Congress, Kadalie purged the ICU of all communists, including those on whom the ICU had relied for its growth. In 1927, at the turning point in the ICU’s rise and fall, Kadalie became the first African to attend an ILO (International Labour Organisation) meeting. While Kadalie was schmoozing European support, things were going awry in Johannesburg and Durban, where Allison Wessels George Champion (*his father’s original name was Mhlongo*) made a play to be emperor of the ICU and this, together with internal squabbles and corruption, led to its unravelling and fall.

After the communists, including Jimmy la Guma and John Gomas, who were the backbone of organisation and recruitment, were expelled from the ICU, they organised themselves first to build a number of industry-based unions for non-Europeans and then to form a Non-European Federation. By 1929 James La Guma, John Gomas, Johannes Nkosi, Gana Makabeni, Moses Kotane and others, also working with white communist unionists like Ray Alexander, Solly Sachs, Betty du Toit and Willie Kalk, had organised unions in the garment, furniture, sweet, catering, laundry, distributive trade, tailoring, engineering, baking, dairy, meat, transport, and canvas industries.

In 1928 there were five African unions with 10 000 workers. They formed an umbrella body called the South African Federation of Non-European Trades Unions (SAFNETU), which then affiliated to the Red International of Labour Unions.

Gana Makabeni from the CPSA had managed from his base in the African Clothing Workers Union to get a number of other unions up and running in the manufacturing sector and then founded the Coordinating Committee of African Trades Unions. Then Max Gordon, one of very few Trotskyites to be found in the union movement, funded by the fairly conservative SA Institute for Race Relations, and working from his base in the African Laundry Workers Union, expanded the unions' base and formed the Joint Committee of African Trades Unions. But Max then wanted to be its General Secretary, and this caused problems. It was a hallmark of Trotskyites among the white and Coloured intelligentsia to want to dominate at leadership level and they often got their way in doing so. But time had run out for this type of behaviour.

African workers soon put an end to having white leaders for African unions. Although Gordon, who saw nothing wrong with being a leader of four unions at the same time, resisted being shown the door, and he was

finally removed. This also paved the way for the merger between the Coordinating Committee of African Trades Unions and the Joint Committee of African Trades Unions to form CNETU – the Council of Non-European Trades Unions formed in 1941. At this time the African Mineworkers Union, led by the dynamic African unionist John Beaver Marks, was also making its mark felt and by 1944 they had 25 000 paid up members.

In the Western Cape, with the relocation of the CPSA headquarters to Cape Town, unionists like Ray Alexander, Gomas, La Guma, Shuba, Ngedlane, Weinberg, Solly Sachs and others started organising garment workers, transport workers in railways and harbours, and the food processing industry. This is where Reg came into the picture in the early 1940s.

Reg was at that time sent by his employers to continue his apprenticeship in Durban, where George Ponnen and H A Naidoo were developing class consciousness and organising unions among Indian workers. These two unionists were closely associated with other trades unionists like Wilson Cele, Errol Shanley and Eddie Roux, all of whom would contribute to the young apprentice's trades union and political development.

George Ponnen and H A Naidoo spread their union activity to include 'Native' labourers alongside Indian and white workers. They made a particularly monumental breakthrough in the iron and steel sector, forming the Iron and Steel Workers Union. Their aim was to unite all non-Europeans as African workers in one labour movement. By 1945, the union movement of workers in the CNETU was 158 000 strong, in 119 unions in iron, steel and engineering; mining; commercial and distributive trades; municipal services; transport; building; laundry; timber; cement and brick and tile; food; chemicals; explosives and tobacco sectors.

The CNETU then developed a relationship with progressive leaders and unions in the Trades and Labour Councils of white labour and campaigning now began for government recognition of African Trades Union rights and also for the need to build maximum worker unity based on non-racialism.

Reg September's first taste of trades unions, as we have seen, was when he entered the apprenticeship in the shoe-making trade and joined the Leather Worker's Union. The unions at that time in the Cape were still strongly in the mould of craft unions that were predominantly white and strongly influenced by trades unions in Britain. They were framed by the Industrial Conciliation Act, which imposed separate and inferior status on workers labelled Coloured and did not recognise workers labelled Natives. Reg pointed out:

This legal framework where there was an "A" shop for whites, a "B" shop for Coloureds and no entry into the union for Native, entrenched attitudes very quickly and many in the Coloured communities unfortunately bought into this notion of being willing to be second-class to the white man, rather than be first class African workers.

After the factory where I was working had closed down, I went to Durban to continue my apprenticeship, but dropped out because of the exploitation within the apprenticeship system. I then returned to Cape Town and for a while I worked, for better pay, as an "unskilled" worker even although my skills were well developed during my apprenticeship. But then my older comrades in the political and trades union arena suggested that I come into the trades unions and work as an organiser.

By this time, I had gone through candidature membership of the CPSA and was a full member of the Party. Also in 1944, when I was 21, I married Hettie McCleod, a feisty young activist who tirelessly engaged in the struggle at a whole range of levels.

When I was offered the job as a trades union organiser I was in a dilemma because I was now married, and the monthly salary was only £11 per month which was less than half of what I was earning at the factory. But I had nothing to worry about. Hettie supported my decision to go work full time for the union.

I had come to know Hettie from schooldays already and we got closer through our work in the political arena. She had qualified as a teacher in 1945 at Wesley Training College and had become active in the Anti-CAD. In 1945 she joined the CPSA and campaigned for communist candidate Harry Snitcher in the elections for local government. Together with John Morley they formed the Women's Food Committee.

During the war years there was scarcity of rice and all essential foods. The army trucks would choose a spot in a district and bring food to be sold. There was also rationing and, in that situation black-marketing became a problem. There was always chaos and fights breaking out, so the Women's Food Committee organised women to ensure a more orderly and equal approach was taken for food distribution. It grew into a very big and popular institution.

Out of the Women's Food committee the CPSA Christmas Club and its famous Xmas Hampers linked to the Guardian Newspaper sales developed. John Morley and Hetty would go around door to door on weekends to collect the Hamper Club monies and this became a form of political outreach.

My first marriage to Hettie unfortunately did not last more than a year. We lived in her parents' home and that just became unbearable, and we did not stand a chance in starting a happy life together.

Because I was earning a pittance as a union organiser and spent much time on the road our marriage also took a huge strain. Of course, that was our first attempt at marriage. We later married again. Nonetheless, Hettie and I continued to work within the party together. Our political engagement was a lifetime road. Hettie had a son Peter in 1951, and later when we married again, I adopted Peter as my

own son, and I loved him as my own. Years later Peter died when he did not recover consciousness after an operation. It was a terrible shock to us all and a great loss.

Reg explained his transition in 1947 into full time union work saying: I took up my first post as secretary for the Coloured “B”-Branch of the National Union of Distributive Workers (NUDW) in Cape Town, in 1947, but the following year I was asked to make another move. I also remarried to Sakena Dollie, by Muslim rites. She was the daughter of Sarleh and Kulsum Dollie. Sarleh was an associate and extended family of Dr Abdullah Abdurrahman and one of my communist party mentors, Cissie Gool.

The new move was for a 20 month stretch to the Eastern Cape, where my daughter Zena was born in Alice in October 1949. I joined the Textiles Workers’ Union as full-time Secretary/Organiser of the Port Elizabeth Branch. This was my longest move away from Cape Town and we experienced financial difficulties, as union work does not pay well nor does one get paid on time. I also doubled up as a correspondent for the CPSA newspaper – the Guardian.

In PE (Port Elizabeth now Gqeberha), I was mentored by a local CPSA councillor M M Desai, and I engaged with leading members of the African National Congress – Prof. Joe Matthews, Raymond Mhlaba, Dr Njongwe, Bob Matjie, Dr Bokwe and Govan Mbeki. This was like getting a university education in the struggle. My work for the Guardian newspaper also kept me abreast with the broader world.

Betty Radford launched the Guardian in Cape Town in 1937 and it became a powerful left newspaper that became popular among workers. As I mentioned the Guardian also ran a Xmas Hamper Club as both a fundraising tool and a means for political consciousness raising amongst workers.

In this same year Gregoire Boonzaier the famous artist joined the CPSA, and he would play a big role in my life as a friend and sponsor later in the early 1950s when I was sent to England.

Through my membership of the CPSA and the various tasks that were required to be done I got to know a wide range of people, each of whom would feature large in my life. A number of these were left-wing ex-servicemen fresh from the second world war – among them Sergeant John Morley, the Red Sergeant, Joe Slovo, Cecil Williams, Fred Carneson, and the amazing ‘Mr Guardian’ – Wolfie Kodesh. The latter two, and Joe Slovo, would play a further big role in my life over the next 60 years.

The imperial powers quickly used the worst of the fascist securocrats’ examples to repress the resistance breaking out in their colonies. In South Africa, imperialism had developed a strong European descendant colonist community that had established deep roots in the country. After WW2 when coming to power in 1948 the Apartheid regime quickly developed a neo-fascist ideological framework and neo-fascist police state methods of repressing the growing discontent. Its leaders were well versed in the most repressive counter-insurgency methods to check the quickly developing ideological national liberation framework of resistance towards seizure of state power. Communists were identified as the greatest threat and the regime was well aware that if anti-communism was their focus, the Western block of countries would support them; if not openly, certainly covertly. In the coming years Reg September would become a target of the Apartheid state security repression.

From the mid-1940s mass mobilisation, empowerment of the working class and the building of a national liberation movement became Reg September’s new life. But in this approach Reg found that there were not only the colonists, imperialists, and capitalist corporations to contend with;

there were also fringe elements of the ultra-left radicals who aggressively opposed the concept of ‘national liberation’ and broad-based black united fronts across classes and strata in South African society. They mischievously interpreted this as pandering to capitalism.

Regardless of trying to work with these forces in united left front formations and explaining that in the context of colonialism and imperialism, the struggle for anti-imperialist national liberation was intricately bound up with social liberation of the working class, Reg and his comrades found their ideas rejected by the far-left radicals. The far-left radicals would not concede that, considering the balance of forces in the world and the struggle in different national contexts, liberation effectively meant liberating the working class when also drawing in other strata and classes.

The argument that Reg and others forwarded, that there could be no meaningful mass mobilisation if the 87% majority people who were labelled ‘Natives’ were not taking the lead in such a struggle, met a similar fate. The struggle had to be led by the majority and most oppressed black communities not a small minority of white or even those classified Coloured middle-class intellectuals. Indeed, Reg argued that Coloured people should develop their own African consciousness and join their other African brothers and sisters, where their real common black interests would be championed.

Reg saw that the challenge for Coloured people was to address whether we were part of an African majority without asking for a ‘special group’ place, or were we to choose to exist in a no-man’s-land between the wire and the wall? Did we see ourselves as an appendage to “White South Africa” – as second class “Whites”?

Reg consciously chose to play the long game of working hard to build an African Consciousness among Coloured people through the creation of nurturing grounds and a tactical organisational platform (SACPC) to build

a non-racial culture and accept broader African leadership, inclusive of Coloureds in the struggle for national liberation. He believed that the best option would be to develop a consciousness among Coloured people that they were Africans, but failing to achieve this, or at least on the road striving to achieve this, the tactical approach was at least to ensure an effective alliance between significant sections of the Coloured people and the African National Congress as a liberation movement. The formation of the South African Coloured Peoples Organisation, later with the name change of ‘organisation’ to ‘congress’ (SACPC) as a revival of the old APO would be the vehicle for doing so.

Reg’s work was orientated around assisting Coloured people to discover that they were part and parcel of the African majority, with a distinct cultural heritage identity, just like the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, or Tswana peoples. That unique sub-cultural heritage involved multi-faceted historical experiences of the colonial subjugation, exploitation, genocide, de-Africanisation and imposition of Apartheid on our San, Cape Khoe, Korana, Nama, Griqua, and Gqunukhwebe ancestors, our African and Asian slave ancestors, and our other migrant non-European ancestors as well as our European non-conformist ancestors, who voluntarily assimilated themselves into our ranks.

Reg argued that as Africans of mixed or multi-ethnic heritage who made up just a fraction of the overall African population, we needed to embrace our brothers and sisters and stop acting as a separate minority group. He felt we should act as Africans with what he called a creole sub-cultural heritage and what many of us now call a “Camissa African” ancestral-cultural heritage.

In the context of the 1950s to 1994, Reg had no qualms in calling this sub-cultural heritage Coloured, as that is what people could understand. After 1994 Reg was open to exploring different terminology, but this did not

fundamentally change his sound framework. To emphasise his position, Reg was absolutely opposed to prefixing Coloured with “so-called” or referring to Coloured people as a conundrum. He felt that this was an insult and a denial that Africans with a creole or mixed sub-culture heritage existed.

This position was lost on the far-left, which had an interpretation that national and ancestral-cultural heritage identities had no place in the struggle, in which there were only revolutionaries and non-revolutionaries. Community cultural identities did not matter; all that mattered to the radical-left was clarity of ideology, resolve and commitment. This difference that Reg September had with the radical-left would fester and result in many conflicts.

6

Navigating the Cape Town radical left conflict

As author of this biography, I found the following part of Reg September's story very difficult to deal with and present, because together with its impacts as shown later in the period of Reg's life in exile in London in the 1960s and 1970s there was such a lot of focus on these issues in his notes. It clearly was a tempestuous part of his as gleaned life from the documentation available to me from Reg's own archive and from conversations with him. I have tried to project his differences with the radical-left as coherently and openly as possible and in keeping with how Reg saw these times and the people with whom he interacted.

The 1940s and 1950s were a time of heated Cape politics with sharp differences between protagonists. While the detail covered in Reg's archive notes makes this all come back to life vividly, showing just how destructive the conflicts of this period were, it is all the sadder when with hindsight we can see that this period in South Africa's history was akin to the divisions at the time of the rise of the Third Reich in Germany. The petty political bickering and undermining of each other practiced by some in a period of great repression, should be seen against the backdrop of severe intimidation and terror faced by others at the same time. This period was a mini-ideological civil war of the mind for people like Reg September and hence he held strong views on this subject.

Going back and having to rake all this up was deeply disturbing for me as a writer-researcher, because it was a raking up of painful periods in Reg's life. It's also sad to know that Reg carried all of this in his mind and on his shoulders, and then later in London continued to be caught up in the middle of very aggressive radical-left factionalism. This was then immediately followed by an equally difficult onslaught by the narrow-nationalist right faction within the ANC, the African National Congress (African Nationalist), which was like the mirror version of the radical-left onslaught. This story will deal with the latter later on when relating Reg's story in London of the 1960s and 1970s when the ultra-left and the nationalist-right put the squeeze on Reg from both sides.

Reg was personally vilified and hurt in the process, but never did he give up his struggle. The build-up of tensions over 20 years led to a serious deterioration in Reg's health, which required urgent medical attention. Without going into the details, Reg's medical records were also available in his boxes of archived documents. I here try to capture Reg's expressed views, analyses, and feelings not only in terms of what he says in his interviews, but also as they were sharply expressed in the 1970s when I first had contact with him. I gleaned much from my reading of the prodigious notes and documentation that he left us and will use his own words as much as possible.

Very often the protagonists in the radical-left saga were actually close friends and family, making the pain even deeper. The Cape Town political world was actually a very small world – a fishbowl where everyone knew everyone else. It was a tempestuous world, where people unfortunately also devoured each other. Many others have written much about their views of the times. Reg's account and views has had very little coverage.

I must however note that the tensions, the anger, the sharpness and suspicions, and the aggressive sparring language of that time, in time gave

way to gentler, mellow, and forgiving language, which was much more nuanced and even led to understanding, in Reg's later days. In Reg's documents one could also see proof that he reached out to his opponents in the evening of his life, with words of appreciation for their roles in the struggle despite differences held.

As a biographer and historian, and avoiding going down any comparative-studies route, I have to put across the way Reg experienced that time and how he argued his ground.

I was particularly moved when reading one note by Reg, referring to the conflict of that time concerning the late Basil February who lost his life in battle. Referring to the radical-left turmoil Reg says:

It was a tragedy because you know, it wasted lives. It wasted a lot of energy and time and was misdirected.

Yes, I remember too, you know, Basil February, who was at one stage during his student days, a blue-eyed boy of the Teacher's League, the Unity Movement people. A very competent young man and he was highly regarded in our community. I shall never forget because subsequently he came across to us and just before he left for his military training, we met, here at a party in Kenilworth, at the home of one of the members of the Snitcher family and he shed tears.

I can remember so clearly the picture of the location. And he shed tears and he said, do what you can to save the youth who have been misled so badly by the Unity Movement. And that's what it amounted to. They have misled the students; a lot of students, and all the time, never at any stage did they lead the students in the direction of acting jointly with the mass forces in the struggle for national liberation.

In my reading of the Spanish Civil War, and of various partisan movements during the World War II, I had read difficult accounts of inter-left conflicts like this, with much blood-letting. Basil February laid down his

life in combat during the Wankie Campaign of MK against the joint Smith and SAP Rhodesian forces in 1967. I got a similar sense of sadness about this time from Dulcie September, (who also first cut her teeth among the radical-left) when she was with us in Zambia. I again must give Reg much credit for having worked through the anger and healing of memories by the evening years of his life, because this period and its detail no longer preoccupied his mind.

His biography cannot paper over the difficulties, and it does serve as a lesson to future generations about the senselessness and destructiveness that can be unleashed by the tiger of petty ideological conflict and grandstanding. In reaching out to former opponents in his old age, Reg would have wanted me to make clear that his critique of the situations faced in the past should NOT imply a totally negative generalisation of all involved in other political formations. He appreciated that it certainly was not just the ANC which fought the struggle against Apartheid, colonialism, and capitalism.

I found a questionnaire among Reg's documents, in which he answered over 50 questions. He was asked to name his favourite quotation, and his answer was most illuminating:

"I may hate what you say, but shall defend to death your right to say it" – a paraphrased quotation first developed by Evelyn Hall to capture an attitude by Voltaire (pen name of Francois-Marie Arouet) in defence of Helvetius in 1758. In making the quote Reg wrote next to the quote "Shaw???" He was uncertain of its source.

From my whole experience of Reg for over 30 years I believe that this answer actually summarises the man. Unlike many others who tried to suppress questioning and debate, Reg believed that we need to listen and debate and not shut down discourse simply because it does not gel with a dominant or personal view.

A few other answers to questions in the same questionnaire are appropriate to mention here because they expose the heart and mind of Reg September in his own words.

Question: What do you understand by the term non-racial?

Answer: *A system in which different cultural and language groups will respect each other and develop a national commitment and unity of purpose.*

Question: What do you understand by the term non-sexist?

Answer: *The fullest opportunity for each sex to develop and contribute to a society in which each will have concern for each other.*

Question: Which political figures in South Africa did you respect the most?

Answer: *Madiba, Tambo, Sisulu, Tutu, Beyers Naude and Bantu Holomisa... for their moral courage and spirit of independence.*

Question: Other than saying a non-racial, non-sexist, democratic South Africa what is your political philosophy?

Answer: *Full public participation in all institutions of state to ensure accountability of parliament and government, and a mixed-economy, public and private, but where basic sectors of the economy need maximum state participation, but NOT RUN by politicians and bureaucrats, and where civil society participation is vital.*

Question: What is your vision of the kind of society you would like us to become, other than the obvious.

Answer: *Free of racism. At peace and with respect for each other; with the fullest development of resources underpinned by conservation consciousness; but it is absolutely essential that everything is built on people's participation which would ensure our finest ideals are upheld and this needs to be constant.*

Question: What in your opinion are some of the greatest hurdles to overcome?

Answer: *To overcome the great divide between the super-privileged and the dispossessed which still correlates to the colour divide. To overcome poverty. To overcome intolerance. We need a new culture of tolerance, and all effort is needed to bury violence. Justice goes hand in glove with tolerance.*

Question: What international events, recent and not so recent have influenced your political thinking and work?

Answer: *Understanding the reasons for both the RISE and the FALL of the USSR; Vietnam's struggle; The stubbornness of Iran in standing up to the USA; Martin Luther King and Gandhi's lives, struggles and teachings; The tremendous and unprecedented solidarity with our struggle, throughout the world.*

Question: What do you consider your least successful undertaking?

Answer: That we have yet to see a more significant participation in the national arena on the part of the Coloured community from which I spring and what appears to be a possible marginalisation and self-marginalisation of Coloured people post 1994. The weak manner in which we have tackled building a non-racial South Africa and how we sometimes embraced Apartheid tools, structures, and ways of doing business. Our slow approach to tackling homelessness, poverty and matters close to the working-class.

All of these answers shed some light on how different Reg September was, in being an independent thinker, even though he was most loyal to the collective positions of the liberation movement. The last answer reveals sadness about one of the most important focus points and challenges in his life's work. The answers are short, off the top of his head, honest from the heart, and not the usual complex rambling way answers are given.

Reg initially took every step along with others to accommodate and build a common front with the radical-left intelligentsia and indeed took seriously some of the concerns that were shared by them about narrow nationalism. Indeed, Reg fought this narrow ethno-nationalism with all his might throughout his years. The radical-left intelligentsia were rightly concerned, and some of the narrow-nationalist thinking was at the cutting edge of politics at the time, but the radical-left intelligentsia were too rigid in not allowing for a unified strategy to be crafted and they were religiously opposed to using the necessary tactics for gaining ground in any fight. For Reg, they lived in a bubble world divorced from social realities in South Africa.

Reg argued that there was a distinguishing line between the bourgeois narrow nationalism of elites and the working-class anti-imperialist national liberation struggles in places where whole societies were oppressed by

Imperialists using colonialism as a controlling mechanism. He saw that the opposition to imperialism and colonialism, the building of black pride and confidence, and black intellectual knowledge all needed to be used as part of the struggle for working class hegemony and forwarding socialism. Narrow nationalism was something very different from national-liberationism which was an anti-colonial and anti-imperial movement for liberation by oppressed people for social and economic freedom .

The radical-left, who in the main were a tiny sector among white or Coloured people whom Reg described as ‘leaning-white’ found the whole idea of ‘black pride and confidence-building’ and ‘anti-colonial national struggle against imperialism’ as a distraction from what they called ‘revolutionary’ socialist goals. They believed that they had all the answers and were not prepared to subject themselves to the leadership of what they saw as petit-bourgeois ‘Native’ nationalists. Would that life be so simple, he would say, raising his eyes to the sky.

Reg expressed that Cape Town’s radical or ultraleft saw European Trotskyite socialist thinking, and the ill-defined notion of ‘permanent revolution’ as the only intellectual framework that offered liberation.

For various reasons, political activity in other parts of South Africa had gone into the doldrums in the 1930s, while Cape Town had become the hub for political revival and the testing of unity platforms. By the 1950s there was a new sense of urgency all over the country about throwing off colonialism, racism, and its social engineering and Cape radical-leftists were left side-lined.

Political activity became highly focused on the arena of the African working class, and it included winning over those labelled Coloured – unfortunately dominated by middle class intellectuals, largely state

employees and professionals who were either ultra-conservative or ultra-left and way out on indulgent political tangents that alienated workers.

Reg identified the fact that the teaching profession, state employees, while acting out displays of radicalism, were in fact often retarding progress within the Coloured communities. This opened up the exploitation of the Coloured working-class by the white institutional political establishment, ever ready to exploit 'divide and rule' opportunities.

Reg particularly pointed out the contradiction of the radical-left intelligentsia whereby they peculiarly identified themselves using the term 'non-collaborationist' yet as state-employees with state benefits running Coloured schools using the state curriculum, by their own standard of labelling others, they were collaborating with the Apartheid state as compliant state employees, never mind how radical they were in their ideas. They hung themselves by their own petard. Reg was clear that he was not stooping to their level and not calling them collaborators, but simply pointing out that they were the last to be labelling many others including the majority of oppressed and their organisations as being tainted collaborators, even while the Apartheid regime's might was used to repress and persecute those that the radical-left denigrated.

In teaching and guiding new generations coming into the ANC in the 1960s and 1970s Reg presented his analysis of the difficult terrain of the 1940s and 1950s. He noted that by the 1940s in Cape Town the kind of factional, disruptive behaviour that the CPSA had experienced within itself in the late 1920s and 1930s, had now visited Cape Town in a different form, as Trotskyite sectarianism, and hollow radicalism. It came from outside of CPSA ranks, some of whom had started out in the CPSA and had left or been expelled, and that these elements targeted the CPSA as much as the Apartheid regime had done. Reg at the time felt that some of the worst

elements of attacks and disruptions was nothing but a thinly disguised anti-communist approach using provocateurs methods dressed up in radical clothes.

For Reg, this crude, aggressive antagonism to communists and national liberationists was matched only by the same from the National Party. It disrupted much hard work that was being put into developing united front political organisations of the time and drawing the Coloured working-class into the African family of workers, where they belonged.

The form that these forces took was a thinly veiled Coloured separatism that was self-indulgent and extremely negative in that it employed disruptiveness within the struggle arena. Though the WPSA and the NEUM flew the flag of 'Unity', Reg said it was everything but 'Unity', and was a remote elite divorced from the working-class and the majority of the African people. It was just a tiny, chattering middle-class phenomenon that was relatively racially exclusive. Reg put it this way: *Any study of all the elements expounded by the Workers Party of South Africa (WPSA), forerunner to the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), would show that they tail-ended on the articulation and campaigning of the CPSA, African trades unions, and the NLL. Goolam Gool's personal platform was built within the NLL which he them sought to "crush" from within, to use his own word.*

The modus operandi was 'entryism' whereby they entered the membership of outstanding organisations working in this arena and either tried to take over, or destroy such organisations from within and then create an alternative with the rump willing to go the WPSA way. Fellow organisations were the enemy, rather than the oppressive state and capitalist establishment.

The biggest casualty of the WPSA entryism was their destructive behaviour in the All-African Convention (AAC), which had started off on a promising footing, although it was very conservative in the main. The ANC and CPSA

were also in the AAC, and the CPSA pushed against the conservatives, but not in a manner that would result in domination by a radical fringe who chased off any who did not follow their dictates. This ultimately resulted in the destruction of the AAC as a progressive vehicle in the crucial opposition to the Herzog Bills and removal of the 'Native' franchise in the Cape.

The AAC became nothing but a shell in the hands of a few Trotskyites enamoured by their own self-importance. By 1943 the WPSA and the Anti-CAD very dishonestly tried to reincarnate the AAC and the NLL, which they had done everything to destroy. This became known as the Non-European Unity Movement with Dr Goolam Gool in the driving seat after "smashing the NLL".

According to Reg's outlook, the NEUM was really held together by naive teachers – compliant government employees – in the TLSA. They came up with a 10-point programme that was vague and reformist, but declared it to be the most radical of plans. They tail-ended the much more important moves in the country for effective unity, and the building of mass resistance to capitalist exploitation, segregation, colonialism, and imperialism – the emergent national liberation movement. They could not subject themselves to leadership that reflected the majority in terms of class and colour, and everyone was expected to accept Coloured intelligentsia as the leadership force.

Reg's angry assessment just stopped short of an accusation that the radical-left behaved like fifth columnists.

In terms of their tools or tactics of struggle, Reg said that these were literally non-existent. Their watchword was 'Non-Collaboration,' but as Reg indicated: *The majority of their member support-base were teachers, and one could not get more collaborationist than being in this compliant profession. They are to be understood by their fruits – using that biblical phrase – by their fruits you shall know them.*

They were most well-known for doing the opposite of what they stated – unity became disunity, co-operation with other organisations was viewed as being tainted, boycott became opposition to boycotts if they did not lead it, non-collaboration became collaboration; every tactic used in the political and labour movement was pulled apart and condemned.

Reg came into the political arena through being a youth member of the National Liberation League and in the Non-European United Front era, led by communists, trades unionists and in union with some of the Trotskyite and other radical-left intellectuals. There was great hope that for once the narrow sectarianism of European left politics could be put to bed in favour of practically building non-European working-class unity above the divide and rule approaches of the white colonialists. The inevitable defeat of white minority rule was the vision.

For a while Reg was involved in dual interactions with those who originally worked together with the NLL from the Teachers League of South Africa (TLSA) and those in the TLSA who took the approach of the Workers Party of South Africa. The latter elements however played a very disruptive role in the National Liberation League, leading ultimately to its destruction. They did the same in the NEUF. The WPSA collapsed around 1944 but from this background the Non-European Unity Movement was formed in 1943.

What stands out sharply is that the earliest movers and shakers of the WPSA and NEUM were really very young and inexperienced, with rudimentary education, and were largely self-taught by reading left literature embedded in USA and European schism among the left. Somehow this thinking became embedded among young intellectuals and professionals who would take these ideas forward in the 1940s and 1950s. A bridge between the adventurous self-schooled ultra-left white youngsters and the

Coloured and white intelligentsia was a young industrial chemist graduate from UCT who after relocating to Johannesburg entered the trades union arena, as a Trotskyite ideologue, where he successfully formed a number of unions – Max Gordon.

The Workers Party of South Africa (WPSA) was one of the first Trotskyist organisation in South Africa that grew out the Lenin Club and the Bolshevik-Leninist League of South Africa, which in turn were rooted in the older Industrial Socialist League. It was largely founded in two stages by a small group of radical-left youth – largely white, with a few Coloured intellectuals. Though having grand sounding names, they comprised of just a handful of people.

Its roots go back to a 21-year-old man going by the pseudonym of Isaac Blank who later took on another pseudonym – Ted Grant (*his real name has never been discovered*)¹⁰ born in 1913, and who claimed to be the pioneering force behind the formation of the WPSA in 1935. He left South Africa for Britain in 1934, never to return again, where he became a well-known founding father of the Trotskyite Militant Tendency tradition in the UK.¹¹

In 1934, Grant and Rafael Levy (*pseudonym 'Raff' Ralph Lee*) founded the Bolshevik-Leninist League of South Africa, a small Trotskyist group which was one of the two groups that formed WPSA. Lee left for Britain in 1937, but returned to South Africa in 1944 with his wife. There was a cloud over his name when some had accused him of embezzling union funds before he left for Britain. Though he received support from some in South Africa

¹⁰ Wade B; "Obituary". The Guardian (newspaper); London; (27 July 2006).

¹¹ The Ted Grant Archive – Biographies – by Alan Woods and Rob Sewell – www.tedgrant.org)

saying that this never happened, the cloud remained, and damaged his reputation among sections of the British left.

Grant was barely 16 years old in 1929 when recruited by Lee who had been a lodger in Grant's mother's boarding house. Ralph Lee claimed to have been a founding member of the CPSA at the age of 14, but the CPSA expelled him in 1927 a year after he had joined. Ian Hunter in *'Raff Lee and the Pioneer Trotskyists of Johannesburg'*¹² says that Grant claimed to be won over to becoming a Marxist through avid reading between the age of 11 to 14 years old. Whatever the case may be, he was only 21 when he left South Africa for Britain. This simply illustrates the contradictions and maturity levels of those involved in the early radical-left that caused so much havoc in resistance politics at the time.

Others like Charlie van Gelderen, (*same age 21, as Grant and who also left for Britain*), Manuel Lopes (*who started off with Joe Pick and others in the radical-left Industrial Socialist League and CPSA, but would later join the National Party*), a Scottish woman, Dora Taylor, Max Gordon, and "Tabby" Isaac Bangani Tabata, Goolam Gool and others in Cape Town, were founders of the WPSA. Max Gordon (Max Livetsky) was really the only one who had labour experience as a trades union organiser – but one who had a controlling nature, insisting on leading every one of the unions that he formed. This became his Achilles heel and ultimately led to his ejection from the union arena by workers.

During his 20-month stay in London in the early 1950s and later when he was based in London in exile, Reg September studied the very fractured British Trotskyite left and the largely white South African connection. In his opinion these had question-marks and dodginess written all over their

¹² In the journal-Les Cahiers du CERMTRI, no. 61, June 1991

profiles. Grant and another maverick ultra-left personality Gerry Healy were the loudest ultra-left voices in the UK from the 1960s to the 1980s. Eccentricity, contradictions and in the case of Healy, scandals aplenty, appeared in the news media around the ultra-left. In Reg's opinion these organisations, the characters involved, and their financial resources pointed to intelligence agency mischief, some form of provocateurism at work and to rogue corporations and the underworld. Reg's instinct was that something smelled bad and that he needed to protect the resistance work of the liberation movement from such characters.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Reg was preoccupied with concern about what he saw as the potential for damage to South African youth and the liberation struggle that could come from this quarter. He believed that the Apartheid regime encouraged mischief from this quarter while doing all that they could to stop the ANC and SACP from influencing youth.

As far as Reg was concerned the mischief on the South African front focused on damaging and fracturing resistance to the white minority regime, by using ultra-left rhetoric and polemic. In other words, Reg argued that there was much in this arena that was engineered provocateur behaviours using the unwitting and naive political fringe. He believed that under British Commonwealth South Africa it was fanned by British Intelligence agencies, and this was taken over by the Apartheid regime's secret police. Reg's sad remark was that unfortunately some decent people, with pure motives were duped and sucked into something that was dubious from its beginnings.

Whether right or wrong in his assessments, and many would cross swords and reject Reg's analysis, Reg did hold these views and spent much effort warning younger generations of activists to have a healthy distrust of the radical-left. It is important to note that in saying this, he was not painting

individual radical-left opponents as being enemy agents. He was simply saying that the organisations and individuals with large egos were often unwittingly embroiled in something much bigger and insidious than themselves. However, it would be foolish on my part as the author, to leave the impression that this type of thinking did not contribute towards forms of branding and demonising of ultra-left personalities any less than those ultra-left personalities branded and demonised those they called Stalinists and “tankies”. Any recall of this inter-left warfare has to acknowledge that the conflict was bitter and destructive all-round.

In this context Reg, without being personally disparaging, saw Isaac Tabata, the far-left intelligentsia personality, as having been taken advantage of and groomed simply as a divisive polemicist. He was feted and his role embellished to being that of a super intellectual and revolutionary. Reg however was of the opinion that only a few gullible middle-class intellectuals, detached from real struggles on the ground among the working-class fell for it.

In later life, 1966 to be exact, Reg September met Tabby Tabata at a rally in Cuba and found that he had mellowed somewhat. Indeed, he was being hosted and was enjoying the company of the very communist party that he had earlier in his life so studiously opposed. The Cubans were well aware of his history and track-record. Tabby had mellowed. But Reg, with a smile, also said that *‘we have all mellowed in time... as I always said, it was often complete “nonsense” that kept us apart’*.

Reg explained the scenario in Cuba like this – *The context was the Tricontinental Conference; an unforgettable experience bringing Africans, Asians, and Latin-Americans together. A huge bonfire had also been lit after a speech by Fidel at about three or four o’clock in the morning.*

As we were going into a meeting of all the representatives, I found myself behind Tabby, Tabata. I can remember first seeing him finding difficulty when Fidel was hammering the Trotskyites in Latin America, but eventually Tabby found himself cheering as Fidel lambasted the Trotskyites. Poor chap. It must have been a great difficulty. I did not rag him about it at all. We pleasantly exchanged stories and I explained how much the Cuban party had assisted the SACP and MK.

Reg in his notes explain the following about Tabby Tabata giving some context: *Tabby Tabata was from Queenstown, and he was a Fort Hare graduate who married Jane Gool in Cape Town who had joined the Trotskyist Workers International League (WIL). He was actually a conservative fellow not too comfortable in a radical skin and his writings were ultra-radical polemic, mixing Marxist-Leninist theories with his own unique interpretations and overlays on the South African scenarios.*

This attracted the attention of the Apartheid regime who served him banning orders for 5 years in 1956 as part of the general clamp-down on everyone that they considered to be red subversives. His works were also banned. In 1961 he was instrumental in forming the African People's Democratic Union of Southern Africa (APDUSA) and became its president. It had no real mass base to speak of – a paper tiger.

Thereafter, within a couple of years, he went into exile abroad to raise funds for APDUSA, support, and seek recognition, but there was nothing of substance to show for the grand name fronting for the narrow Trotskyite cause. In exile and solidarity movement circles his accounts of resistance activity raised eyebrows, and a concern about embellishment of the real situation. He was embraced only by some on the radical-left fringe of British politics and for a decade he would operate by lobbying organisations such as the AAM (Anti-Apartheid Movement), OAU (Organisation of African Unity) and UN, but nothing came of these efforts.

His writings were felt to be a mix of conspiracy theories and highbrow academic polemic. At this time there were a range of maverick South Africans knocking on doors and competing to raise funds for “political movements”, but in a very short period, as Anti-Apartheid Movements were formed around the world, they quickly separated out opportunism from the serious struggle organisations. They often consulted me as one of the two earliest promoters of forming a solidarity movement back in 1952.

In practical politics Tabata initially was briefly active in the African Voters Association, but from then on together with his wife and Dr Goolam Gool, he entered the radical-left arena through WPSA, and the All-African Convention (AAC) which was formed to respond to the 1935 Land Acts and the disfranchisement of Africans in the Cape.

This faction successfully destroyed the AAC after first fermenting division. Tabata according to supporters, apparently was briefly involved in opposing the “Rehabilitation Scheme” in the Transkei, during which time he was arrested and acquitted. Tabata’s actual role and that of the NEUM in the revolts in the rural areas were widely questioned as being exaggerated, and the limited role also seems to have been divisive.

WPSA just petered out and died a natural death as there was nothing practically revolutionary about it. When the Apartheid Regime passed its anti-Communist legislation its backbone just disintegrated. For many of us it seemed to be more of a provocateur manipulated initiative aimed at weakening the genuine left. Unfortunately, the potential of the AAC was wrecked by this radical-left sectarianism and its opposition to what it labelled African Nationalism.

The NEUM fractured and split in 1958 and by 1962 when it made a show of having a conference it was already dead. Dishonestly the impression was given that their demise was as a result of a crackdown by the Apartheid regime rather than its own internal devouring of each other. The two main factions were the

Jaffe-Kies faction and the Tabata faction, but the splintering was much deeper than the superficial personality politics analysis that dominates literature on those times. It was bound to happen in terms of the natural fissures in their tiny largely middle-class constituency.

For Reg, Moses Kotane and comrades, the old imperialist and colonial approach of “divide and rule” was at work. What little value was brought into political discourse by the radical-left was negated by the huge disruption and retardation they left in their wake on every campaign embarked on by unity forums. Effectively Reg argued that some elements on the radical-left had been weaponised to keep Coloured people from finding a natural home with other Africans on a united common and nuanced resistance platform.

In the 1960s, when Reg went abroad to lay the foundations for the liberation movement’s international campaigning front, he experienced a sharp learning curve as to what had really happened in Cape Town politics over the previous two decades, as merely an extension of the British ultra-left fringe, which he believed was infiltrated by provocateur agents of western intelligence agencies. Ultimately, according to Reg, the British ultra-left were historically linked to APDUSA, WPSA and the NEUM tradition in its various manifestations right back to the 1920s, and they did everything in their power in the UK to undermine the liberation movement and the solidarity movement by sowing division and misinformation – all in the name of being the most revolutionary.

Reg thought that a paper written by Baruch Hirson, who was a fellow traveller of the radical-left movement was a very useful and reasonably accurate account, though he had some differences with Hirson’s version. Reg would say that even one of their own, in assessing the radical-left path was compelled to acknowledge their colossal failures.

Hirson's account¹³ in Reg's collection of papers provided a small window from the inside on the large egos and disagreements of the characters in NEUM – Kies, Jaffee, Kobus and Tabata. What Reg found interesting in the account was the overarching view of the paper that Tabata's arguments and polemical contortions had led to much confusion and disruptive thought within NEUM. Hirson also hints that the extent of some of Tabata's claimed practical engagements and exploits lack documentary proof or witness testimony. He suggests that embellishing and polemic mixed easily with Tabata's talent for writing and his gospel approach to left politics, which were full of contradictions. Reg digested Baruch Hirson's paper and said that much of what Hirson argued about the internal divisions had the ring of truth. Reg did, however, also say that the vast majority of people who lined up behind these formations and their ideas did so without any understanding of cold-war tactics and did so innocently. He just found it very sad.

Another perspective is provided by Ray Alexander, who was of course one of Reg's mentors. She likened the NEUM and their constituency to the student level of politics that she remembered from the debating societies of her youth in Riga. In talking about the NEUM she said, 'it was very important for young people at university age to go through that phase in life, but to elevate this to be the constant, as a permanent political movement, demonstrated great immaturity. It had value, but it also had a limited shelf life.' She said it was what Lenin referred to as 'left-wing childishness' and an 'infantile disorder'.

We can only hear the thoughts conveyed by Reg September and others, and weigh these up with the literature of the radical-left of that time who have also put their thoughts and views to paper. Somewhere between these

¹³ Baruch Hirson; "A Short History of the Non-European Unity Movement – An Insider's View".

different views there are lessons to be learnt that will probably show that the conflicts between different groups and people got a life of its own, and that there are elements of truth and falsehood all round. Those who opposed the radical-left behaviours certainly had their own divisions and flaws too. New young generations of researchers will probably look at both sides of this radical-left and communist liberationist divide, and come up with a fresh balanced look at the entire era.

Reg went on to point out that a small offshoot group of younger generation activists from the radical-left arena, such as Neville Alexander, Basil February and Dulcie September had also critiqued the NEUM and its offshoots.

Reg quoted Dr Neville Alexander's comment that "non-collaboration, is subject to the Shakespearean law according to which nothing comes out of nothing!"

Dr Neville Alexander had said this in a nuanced analysis of the tradition of non-collaboration, pointing out the value of a non-collaboration strategy in some circumstances, and then also showing that it could and did have a very negative role in yet other circumstances with particular reference to Cape Town in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Reg differed with Dr Alexander's long preamble to his 1986 critique of non-collaboration¹⁴. He believed that his and Dr Alexander's analysis were the same except that Dr Alexander, who was just a child during the earlier years of the non-collaboration movement, believed that those times were different.

¹⁴ Aspects of non-collaboration in the Western Cape 1943–1963
Neville Alexander; *Social Dynamics - A journal of African studies*
Volume 12, 1986 - Issue 1

Reg was a young worker during the earliest days of the destructive application of “non-collaboration” and believed that if Dr Alexander had been his contemporary in those times, he would not have exempted the role-players from the same biting critique that he made in 1986 with hindsight about the 1950s and early 1960s.

Dr Alexander, in his 1986 address at the “Western Cape: Roots and Realities” Conference, showed how something that under certain circumstances could be extremely valuable, became ‘in later practice one of the most divisive and sectarian responses within the South African liberation movement.’

Dr Alexander further said, “The tendency to dub everything and every person that had at one time or another been involved or somehow connected with collaboration tactics as ‘collaborationist’ became the besetting sin of the NEUM and especially of the Anti-CAD Movement. It painted itself into a corner and dragged at least two generations of young people in the Western Cape into a political cul-de-sac.”

He went on to say that non-collaboration was “interpreted in a sterile, ritualistic manner so that any mass action that was not directed against separate political institutions was denounced as reformist, economic, opportunist and treacherous.” Dr Alexander points out the contradiction that stared one in the face, namely that the teachers and principals in the educational arena unsurprisingly enjoyed exemption by the proponents of this type of non-collaboration.

Like Reg, Dr Neville Alexander pointed out that despite the progressive, often overtly socialist rhetoric, the politics of the NEUM were petit bourgeois, as most of them were teachers, civil servants, lawyers, doctors, and students. He went on to point out that this propertied class with vested interests in maintaining their position in (Apartheid) society generally would

not jeopardise that position, and their politics was a perverted weapon of defensiveness, attacking others who put life and limb at risk. He said, “In a politically repressive society such as Apartheid South Africa, the boycott slogan could become, as it did in the Western Cape, the ideal disguise for political abstentionism and more-revolutionary-than-thouism.”

Perhaps the only difference between Reg’s critique and Dr Neville Alexander’s critique is when they differently date the problem as first arising. Reg believed it already arose in his teens in the 1930s whereas Alexander believed the regression only began in the 1950s. There was a 13-year age gap between the two and Alexander had not personally experienced the negativity of the late 1930s and 1940s.

Reg had been on good terms with many of the early NEUM leaders but one by one, in his engagements, they each did something unthinkable that made Reg part company with them and resulted in him taking the hard and critical approach towards them outlined in this chapter.

Reg, however, did not take the same approach, to those on the radical-left who walked the talk such as Dr Neville Alexander, Frank Anthony, and others, even although they disagreed on many finer political points and analysis. He had a high regard for Dr Alexander, and he expressed sadness on how Frank Anthony, a talented thinker-writer, was treated by his organisation APDUSA, simply because he was critical of its leadership and some of its political approaches. Reg said that questioning and disagreeing was not a bad thing; indeed, it was good because this is what builds thought leadership. It is when movements stop challenging themselves through robust debate that they flounder and drift towards totalitarianism. Organisations also flounder when they put a straight-jacket on ideological development and promote a singular gospel that kills the life blood of a movement. The worst thing a political party could do was to restrict its

membership's discourse on broader and open platforms and prescribe their thinking and questioning. Likewise, demonising opponents within the broad liberationist arena was also extremely narrow-minded and dangerous. Reg recognised that demonising those with opposing ideas was also something embedded among some in the ANC, SACP and SACTU too.

In making a very strong stand against the NEUM and its successor bodies Reg was not promoting intolerance, which is a point that he wanted emphasised. He was instead challenging rigidity, the marshalling of ideas and manipulation. This was something that pertained to all political formations, including his own.

Reg had files on everything in his boxes of documents even though it was not well categorised and organised. He particularly kept papers and articles of those who held views different to his own within the coloured community, underlining important parts and making comments. He dismissed nobody; even those who were hostile. There is one note for instance, slightly acidic, that he sent to Barney Desai requesting his opinion on the use of the term "so-called" as a prefix to the word Coloured. This was long after they had so tempestuously clashed, literally warred against each other, and parted ways, and despite his biting critique of the man. I did not find any answer to the correspondence.

In the transcripts of Reg September's interviews, he further expresses himself on engagements with various personalities on the radical-left in Cape Town: *Division within any movement causes untold disillusionment within rank and file. I was not the only person to be affected this way. Over a period of time, I developed great affection for Goolam, but I doubt that I took the trouble to see him after the incident where he had laughed and bragged about smashing the National Liberation League, one of the finest and most progressive pioneering institutions in our liberation struggle. I was later surprised to learn from Moses*

Kotane that he at one time also enjoyed a very close relationship with Goolam, but by the time of my experience Moses revealed that nothing was left of the relationship.

Though still critical, Reg was a bit more sympathetic to Benjamin Kies, as a person rather than to his ideas, because he did at least personally push the boundaries of defiance towards the Apartheid state a bit more than most others on the radical-left. For this he was harassed by the security police, dismissed from teaching, and banned. Later he qualified in legal studies and became an advocate. In the world of ideas Kies made a name for himself with radical polemic, but Reg felt that Kies should not be considered an astute and strategic thinker or a great political force in any way. Reg, said: *“He was a bit of a one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind who was idolised by a coterie of fellow travellers; but that is not what defines outstanding leadership.”*

Reg went on to say: *The life and time of Kies in the Teachers’ League of South Africa were not easy. This constituency was basically dishonest in its critique of others and fond of blowing its own trumpet. It must first be acknowledged that the teaching profession embraced the more fortunate in ‘Coloured’ society. They were a tiny minority, where the vast majority of Coloured people lived in conditions no better than all other Africans, then labelled Natives.*

Teaching, nursing, and becoming a doctor or lawyer were the most sought-after professions because these were really for a long time the only professions open to those in the ‘Coloured’ community who aspired to a better life. Later within the teaching profession there was a clamour too to become a principal of a school. Of course, the latter aspiration caused huge divisions in the TLSA.

Teachers involved in the TLSA, however, had no real awareness that they were a fortunate class above others, and likewise with the few doctors and lawyers. This, and the fact that teachers were relatively docile, rule-following state

servants, was the Achilles heel of the NEUM and the self-proclaimed radical left. They were paper tigers.

Teachers in fact were in no position to practice non-collaboration with the Apartheid state because they were employees of the state machinery. Peculiarly they just could not see the contradiction. They were the most vulnerable and collaborative of all sections employed in society.

Even with those who played a role through extramural activity or bringing into the classroom perspectives that helped to build a political consciousness, their core job was managing the precise vehicle used by the state to enslave and indoctrinate the minds of the people.

The state humoured a degree of latitude, but as happened to just a few individuals like Benjamin Kies, the state did not allow for a position where a mass movement of teachers would struggle against the enslavement of the mind in state-controlled schools. So, they targeted particular individuals to isolate them from the rest. Ben Kies was one such casualty. One must admire his tenacity and resolve under those circumstances.

The TLSA, the bedrock of NEUM radicalism, was hollow and somewhat incestuous. If there ever was a shackled section of the community it was the teachers. In fact, they were the best endowed economically in any of the communities of colour. Their political positions were curtailed by their material and social status when it came to taking real action, where loss of income, insurance policies, homes, vehicles, possessions, family life, and personal freedom or indeed loss of life were concerned, and they were therefore mentally shaped by these factors.

As radical as they sounded, they were enslaved by their middle-class security in a society that depended on delivering within the state sector. It was collaboration whichever way one looks at it.

Critiquing teachers in this way does not imply that there were not many young teachers who used their profession to inject into their teaching content and extra-mural activities and nurturing of questioning, thinking skills, alternative history and a promotion of reading literature that developed political consciousness. Such teachers were the exception rather than the norm and they were often sold out (by fellow teachers) and faced security police harassment because of their actions. The 1976 national youth uprising saw many a clash between teachers and students and a great deal of betrayal.

When the Apartheid regime pulled out all of the stops in their reign of terror in the 1960s, many of these far-left radicals turned their gaze the other way and got on with their lives. They briefly showed their heads in the 1970s but when the heat was turned up again, they went to ground.

The same happened in the mid-1980s, and only when there was huge open resistance, did they once again join in with vociferous radical rhetoric. They were trapped in the contradictory world of their hollow non-collaboration mumbo-jumbo . My experience with the NEUM people was that they always failed to act, except for a few lone people who in fact did so through different organisational formations and paid a huge price, like the rest of the liberation forces. In Dulcie September's case, she paid the ultimate price, when assassinated in Paris. Those have my utmost respect.

We know those on the radical-left that we respect, who were sent to Robben Island or lost everything and were forced into exile. We also know who really took on the state in clandestine defiance. These were struggle heroes as much as those who served their people valiantly in the ANC, SACP, SACTU and other liberation formations like PAC, BCM and others. Political differences should not separate the many who engaged in heroic resistance service, who walked the talk regardless of our various political brands. This must be distinguished from the "pure talkers". The verbally radical movement on the whole were not radical at

all, simply radically different to those in the various movements who actually walked the talk.

Let me pay tribute to one of those real leaders who came out of the NEUM tradition – Dr Neville Alexander. We must give credit where credit is due. This man walked his talk regardless of political differences. I have learnt some important things from him, and I would like to think that he may also have learnt from me and others. We certainly saw eye to eye when Alexander described the NEUM as having painted itself into a corner and dragged at least two generations of young people in the Western Cape into a political cul-de-sac.

This man was an activist by example, a man with the sharpest of minds, a teacher, academic, former Robben Island prisoner with Nelson Mandela, and a hero of the struggle against Apartheid and champion of class struggle. While many younger generation comrades in the ANC may not know who he was, his name was indelibly printed on the political landscape of the Cape and South Africa for decades as a revolutionary intellectual and activist. He was not a polemicist of the Tabata type and our comrades on Robben Island in prison with this man can attest to that. We differed respectfully with some of his views as he did with some of our views, but there was also much common ground.

To lend weight to Reg's opinion we can briefly look at Dr Alexander's background. Neville's mother was the daughter of one of the Oromo enslaved from Ethiopia, Bisho Jarsa. His grandmother was one of the enslaved rescued by the Royal Navy, who arrived in the Cape in 1890. This was after a Slaver-ship was intercepted in 1888, taken to Yemen, and then they were brought to the Cape. Neville's father was a carpenter.

Neville Alexander was born and brought up in Cradock, a town steeped in resistance history. It was here that he had a Roman Catholic upbringing and learnt his deep humanistic values. His early academic training was acquired at UCT, and he obtained his doctorate in Germany.

As a young man he first embarked on the radical path that was to become his lifelong commitment. He quickly became an activist in the Teachers League of South Africa and the NEUM. At this time Neville was brash, youthful, and loud. Some thought even a bit of an arrogant ultra-radical young man, rather typical of many of the university left of the time. But he outgrew these traits, which are shared across the student political spectrum. The ANC and SACP tradition also had its fair share of loud, brash, and arrogant youth too. Some grow up and others don't.

A number of young intellectuals, including Neville Alexander, formed the Yu Chi Chan Club which emerged from those who were frustrated with the NEUM, as an embryonic embracing of armed struggle as a means to attain an overthrow of the Apartheid regime and the capitalist state. Before they could really take off all of the YCCC armed-struggle activists were arrested and were sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. The men spent this time incarcerated on Robben Island.

In prison Neville Alexander got his second education along with South Africa's most famous sons on Robben Island. Neville referred to Robben Island as his real university education. He learnt to listen and respect points of view different to his own. At the same time however, he sharpened his own arguments through debate and often came out on top in his debates with Nelson Mandela and others. All who knew him in this environment came to respect Neville as a great thinker and a remarkable person. The Island taught people to respect each other regardless of their political viewpoints – something that we have unfortunately begun to lose in all political formations today.

After Robben Island, Neville was banned for five years but still found his way to engage in grassroots activity. In 1981, following his lifelong commitment to the struggle in the education arena, he became director of

the South African Committee for Higher Education (SACHED). He also founded the Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa (PRAESA), focusing on alternative education, language, and literacy.

By 1983 he was again in his stride in terms of political activity as a moving force in the National Forum. In more recent times during the 1990s, he was one of those who founded the Workers Organisation for Socialist Action (WOSA). Of course, Reg believed that this was not something that he could endorse and felt it to be a repetition of the erroneous WPSA approach and tradition of which he was critical. Reg would have preferred to see a broad-based workers party established with the SACP working to unite the left in a Democratic Socialist party formation, (something that was discussed in exile) but this did not materialise.

Dr Neville Alexander did not stand on any platform to receive accolades post 1994, nor did he seek any such, or a place to bask in the sun of momentary and partial victories. The Neville Alexander who undoubtedly should hold a special place of respect in our society would also have been more than a little embarrassed about being praised as a super-hero of any sort or likened to the international icons of the left. Many would say that South Africa lost out because he could have made a huge contribution towards radically transforming our education system had the ANC government reached out to him for assistance.

Dr Neville Alexander remained a steadfast intellectual voice who spoke out when it was necessary with well-chosen words and never took to unnecessary carping and name calling, even when he had strong views on many issues.

He certainly did have strong views, and these were unashamedly and consistently leftist views, articulated with great clarity. After his experience on Robben Island, Neville Alexander became more focused and centred on

what he saw as key issues. The brashness of youth receded. He was never rude, arrogant, or disrespectful to those with whom he differed. He patiently plodded away and was a humble activist who made his contribution within his chosen space, laying and cementing one solid brick at a time. Of course, this did not mean that he would spare his critiques in any way. His sword was razor sharp and his thrust was calculated always to cause his opponent to think, think and think again, and not simply to decapitate.

Dr Neville Alexander clearly identified himself on the radical-left in political discourse and many within the broad liberation movement still felt that he defended the views of a very compromised far-left tradition and sharply differed and still differ with many of his views. Reg was one of those that held a different view to Neville's, but he also valued many of Neville's other fine intellectual contributions, and of course his integrity. He respected Dr Neville Alexander's voice.

Regardless of differences, there are many who also agreed with other of Neville's views which they believed were often light years ahead of the narrow debates of the moment. Unfortunately, simply because of the infantile branding game, which lives so comfortably in left politics of every type, these key liberating views of a most advanced thinker were unjustifiably trampled upon. Just like what happened to Reg September, at times unacceptable abuse was hurled at this great man who was undoubtedly one of the outstanding struggle heroes and thinkers.

Many of his views on the burning issues of ethnicity, race, national groups, class, identity, culture, and language which could have, and can, assist South Africa to address the key "explosive powder-keg" of issues, vital to be addressed, unfortunately remain marginalised because of tired old political animosities of the 20th century and almost religionised European Marxist-Leninist rigidity of thought void of African characteristics.

Post 1994, continued adherence to race silos in national discourse remains one of the greatest threats to South African advancement as does the marginalisation of debate of the “National Question”. While Dr Neville Alexander’s contributions are no magic elixir, offering absolute formulas (indeed, no single view be seen as the definitive view), his offerings are certainly ground-breaking in providing keys to unlocking the straight-jacketed thinking in this regard. The greatest tribute that we could give this struggle hero would be to dare to unlock all of our narrow thinking in the arena of addressing these burning issues.

Reg would be the first to say that Dr Neville Alexander left us a legacy in his many writings. Alexander continued to write, up until his passing. In applying our minds in our continued national and class struggles, for social, economic, and political emancipation, there are a number of political activists whom people often foolishly, from a partisan platform, push to the side because of differences in ideas. Reg acknowledged that even though we can differ with some of their views, Alexander, Biko, Sobukwe and others have as much to teach South Africa as any of the greats who come from the SACP and ANC tradition.

Raising this short profile on how even adversaries could see the positives in each other and not only the negatives, provides just a small window into an important approach that Reg took in all his dealings with people. He was a listener and not just a talker. He really wanted to get to grips with the other point of view. If he rejected it, he needed to be able to defend why. If he accepted the other view, he needed to be able to argue why.

This of course did not just apply to those on the far left. He applied this to those conservatives too. Reg was challenged as to why he gave any time to conservatives in Coloured communities who were seen as collaborators with the Apartheid regime. His answer was that it was important to listen so as to

find the gap of dissatisfaction so that we can fashion the tools to win them or their constituencies over to the struggle.

Reg also often went out of his way not to be confrontational and unnecessarily embarrass someone whose view he challenged. He was well known for calling a person aside to a private space and then having a few words. His style did not include grandstanding. A faint smile often played around his face, which otherwise could also be a serious poker player's face. This is a picture of Reg September that is important to convey to future generations looking back on the man and his legacy.

Furthermore, Reg was very aware that in choosing the political path that he did, he had not had access to higher education. This did not result in him having an anti-intellectual attitudes, as is frequently the case in the political arena. No, Reg had quite the opposite view. He admired every person born into difficult circumstances who defied the odds to attain a good education and become experts in their field. He encouraged young people to strive to get the best education that they could acquire. He admired intellectual brilliance and though he may not have had the educational opportunities himself, Reg expanded his mind by reading, and through his close working relationship with intellectual giants in the struggle. Anti-intellectualism is a right-wing, fascist trait and Reg warned that it was a destructive political tendency of the ignorant.

Reg had very strong views on most things but always an open mind. One of his oft used phrases was, *'My word; is that so? I need to have a deeper look at that!'*

The brand is not the end all and be all in life. One's political home too, is not the brand, but it is rather the ethos, the legacy, and the political thinking therein. Brands can come and go but the deeper attributes live on. Reg had seen the greatest brand of his youth disappear – the National Liberation

League, but its ethos, legacy and content arose in other formations. In the future of politics anything can happen; brands can be hijacked, and their deeper content, ethos and legacy be shed. Throughout Reg's life, his relay race, he carried the NLL ethos baton. A liberationist and liberation movement can never be married simply to a brand – that is not revolutionary at all! That is simply a form of secular religion or the same as identifying absolutely with a football club.

To Reg's way of thinking, we would do well to revisit the great leaders mentioned in this and previous chapters and learn from their minds. They all have written legacies which are a goldmine of ideas, concepts, and keys for unlocking many of the vexing issues that we grapple with today. They do not have all of the answers and some of the ideas and positions are doctrinaire and debatable, but it is foolish to dismiss and rubbish all of these ideas as we often do, simply because these personalities were regarded as “not being with us” in the sense of not paying homage to our brand. South Africa will be the loser.

In going through the many statements that Reg made in illustrating why he was opposed to the NEUM, APDUSA and the radical-left, this part of his direct voice is worth including for illustrative purposes: *After the first discussion on the introduction of bus Apartheid with Edgar Maurice of the TLSA I remember very clearly having gone to the home of Ben Kies one Sunday morning together with George Peake, and standing at Kies's stairs and saying to him that we had come to see him about the introduction of bus Apartheid in Cape Town. Instead of engaging on the issue he retorted 'since when did we expect that he would be interested in Communist Party stunts?'*

My response was to say that we did not expect him not to be interested in the threat of bus Apartheid in Cape Town. He then invited us in to have a chat. We chatted for some considerable time, at the end of which he promised he would call

his people together – it was holiday period in December – as soon as they returned. That would be in three or four weeks or whatever it was. And he would come back to us.

Well, that was in fact the last time we saw him, and he never got back to us.

And I remember too very clearly that quite a number of us piled into Toefie Bardien's taxi one evening and went to Dr Muirson's home in Athlone, raising the same question with him of Anti-CAD and NEUM participation with us in united action to oppose bus Apartheid in Cape Town. Here again Dr Muirson promised that he would come back to us with an answer within a specific time because they were due to have a meeting. But this too was the last time they communicated with us.

Our efforts to attract the 'Coloured' working-class and to grow as we should have grown, were killed by the aloofness and the lack of unity in the left. The united front movements paid inadequate attention to working people and simply got bogged down in a left fantasy world of word-games. This was not for me.

As communists we were running night schools either for the illiterate or innumerate in co-operation with the Food and Canning Workers Union in rural towns like Paarl, Stellenbosch, Worcester, Franschhoek and so on, or for those struggling hard to handle the more academic work. We learnt about and used ideas from comrades in Brazil, India and elsewhere that linked literacy and numeracy to political understanding of the conditions within which people lived. The night-school movement of the CPSA just got on with the job and indeed were at the cutting edge of a different kind of education methodology.

Our people had made contact with some comrades on the left in the education section of the social service department in Brazil, in Recife, where people were pioneering literacy in the poor communities using a system called experiential education. They had developed this approach during the depression years and used these ideas in the 1940s as far as I know. Many communists were involved in this

type of thing. Here Ray Alexander was one of those who said it was every communist's duty to contribute time to teaching at night schools.

At that time (1940s) the CPSA effectively used some of this type of approach learnt from comrades in the international communist arena in our night schools. It conscientized and empowered people at many levels. This also doubled up to help people who had to respond to letters from the Magistrate or prepare a case for arbitration and things like that. It built trust between political activists, trades unionists and communities.

We sorely needed the participation of teachers prepared to get out of their comfort zones, but this was not forthcoming. The reason for their lack of participation, regardless of their radical verbiage, was that they did not want to get into trouble because inevitably they would attract the attention of the magistrates, people at the courts or the police. Once this happened these middle-class trendy people dabbling in politics ceased to be respectable or acceptable in their community and status was really important to this crowd.

Only much later in the 1970s the broader left in South Africa also discovered these experiential-education ideas and practices. Catholic Church education centres and church halls in townships became sites of literacy classes and night schools. But at the time those involved had little knowledge that the CPSA and Trades Union night schools were a tradition started in the 1940s where the ideas of 'liberation through education' programmes based on experiential learning by the oppressed had built solid foundations for later years.

Now one exceptional character who I really respected was my old childhood friend Edgar Maurice, as well as his brother, Louis Maurice. Edgar was Vice-President of the TLSA but not a member of the Unity Movement and was a level-headed thinker who told you straight what he thought. I like that in a person. Louis was quite a character.

I believe on one occasion he disarmed a policeman and smashed the cop's rifle around a lamppost. His father would have stood on his head. Maurice senior was as conservative as they come. Many of these fellows were my childhood companions and our relationships would change over the years. But those Maurice boys and I shared something special.

The radical-left in practically distancing themselves from communists and the labour movement, had everything to do with the fact that we were isolated for a frontal attack by the regime. Communists were seen as dirt and vilified and when the CPSA was banned there was hardly a murmur. When it came to communists, the far-right and the far-left had much in common. We were denounced as collaborators by the NEUM, but it is the CPSA that was banned, and communists with a few exceptions, placed under banning orders and treated as “die Rooi Gevaar”, and it was the teachers and middle classes with the radical-chic politics, with a handful of exceptions that largely led normal lives and built their little nest eggs for retirement and putting their children through an education, or built little businesses or had shares portfolios over much of the next forty years. They continue to claim to have been struggle heroes and non-collaborationists. A tiny number were involved in the real struggle, and that I do respect; but the vast majority were not.

One can clearly detect that Reg's words are tinged with some bitterness about those in his community who could have done much more, but “minded their own business” when things got hot and were preoccupied with mental games. But more concerning for Reg was the distance kept in relations between African brothers and sisters classified as Coloureds and Natives. I use the words “brothers and sisters” deliberately here because Reg used these much more than the over-used “comrade”. He used the later more carefully. He used the former because of the emphasis on being African kith and kin.

Reg saw the correlation of class and Colour to be strongly alive in the Coloured middle classes tendency toward white-ism and within the radical-left in particular. This, he felt, damaged relations between Africans labelled 'Coloured' and those labelled 'Native or Black' and led to much backlash in the future years.

Reg said, *'There is lots of anti-racism talk but they themselves do not walk the talk.'* Reg dearly wanted his people to identify with their African-ness and the first step was to embrace their fellow African countrymen and women, as much as those in the NLL had done. He wished that the 'Coloured' community would follow the lead of leaders of the calibre of James la Guma and John Gomas, both of whom were members of the African National Congress as well as the APO, CPSA and NLL, and before that the APO and the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union). Although they played practical leadership roles in all of those organisations, they accepted the leadership of other Africans rather than just having a 'Colouredism' approach.

There was a clear thread in Reg's critique to what he had witnessed as a child. He would constantly return to the analogy of the 'House Slave' and 'Field Slave' being at work in our community, or point out that there were those who either 'played white' or imagined that they elevated themselves by emulating white behaviour. In the teaching profession and their political formations, he felt that theirs was a cloning of 'white madam and master' proxy behaviours at work. To break this in Coloured society for Reg was a challenge, and he believed that this was where we needed to employ a new post-colonial approach to history and heritage, so as to awaken an understanding in the youth that they did not have to walk in the shadow of 'whiteness' but had a legacy of great wealth that could help them stand tall as Africans.

Reg sincerely believed that the Coloured youth could advance by drawing on the heritage of their indigene and African-Asian enslaved forebears as well as those others who were non-European migrants, and including those non-conformist Europeans who assimilated with our black forebears. He also believed that this advancement was also only possible by joining hands with other Africans and not seeing themselves as a separate minority but rather as part of the majority. We should not imprison ourselves in the shadows of the white world but position ourselves firmly and confidently in the African world as equals and not as a minority appendage.

Reg hated the idea that had indoctrinated Coloured people into believing that they were not 'Black' like those who were labelled 'Blacks' but rather some kind of other brownish person of colour, a bit higher on the social ladder. Reg expressed clearly that being proud of one's history and heritage rooted in Cape Slavery and Cape indigenous African societies was extremely important in inspirational terms, but should never be used for primacy claims, othering, tribalism, or separatism.

It was the radical-left's failure to deal with the nitty-gritty important issues affect Coloured people and their relations with other Africans and with the broader working-class that was at the root of the conflict between himself and the firebrand's of that arena.

The harshness of all of this ideological differences, petty bickering and conflict would resurface in a most destructive manner in London during the first two decades of exile. There it threatened to not only undermine everything that Reg had worked so hard to build since the 1930s, but also to wreck the carefully constructed solidarity movement that Reg was a key part of building since 1952 in London. It was also a direct threat to the whole liberation movement as the ultra-left and ultra-right wittingly or unwittingly interfaced with the Apartheid regime's counter-insurgency and the tactics of

the global anti-communist and anti-liberationist drive of western intelligence agencies. Manipulation and fanning of conflict was the name of the game and big-egos offered the perfect vehicle for mischief. These political games that were being played, as Reg saw it, were happening in the deadly environment of the cold war, where South Africa was just one hot-spot among many from the Vietnam War to Cuba. Every little bit of gamesmanship had repercussions that included death and the unravelling of carefully weaved clandestine structures.



Recently returned from exile, Reg September as the ANC Interim Leadership Core's Western Cape Convenor together with Nelson Mandela addressing a press conference in Cape Town. [Family Album (FA)]



Reg September listens attentively as Nelson Mandela addresses a point at a Press Conference in Cape Town. [Family Album (FA)]

Reg and Melissa Steyn with former President Kgalema Motlanthe [FA]



Reg with President Thabo Mbeki. They had worked closely in the ANC executive in exile. [FA]



Nicholas "Boy" September, father of Reg September [FA]



THE EARLY NATIONAL LIBERATION LEAGUE AND CPSA MENTORS: Moses Kotane, James la Guma, Cissie Gool, Wolfie Kodesh, John Gomas, Ray Alexander [Lib Pubs] - Reg with Kader Asmal; and Reg and fellow SACP leader Brian Bunting. [FA]



Reg September addresses the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the African National Congress. [FA]





LEFT: Reg September at the time that he became ANC Chief Representative in London in 1969; **RIGHT:** Reg September with OR Tambo “*Companions in Struggle*” on a visit to India, sitting outside the Taj Mahal [FA]

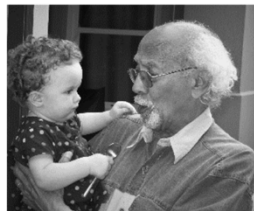


ABOVE: Reg September with OR Tambo at Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College – SOMAFCO in Mazimbu, Morogoro, Tanzania.

RIGHT: Reg with Melissa’s grandchild. [FA]



ABOVE: The author, Patric Tariq Mellet with Reg September in the evening days of his life, thirty-three years since their first meeting in Bontleng, Gaborone, Botswana. [FA]

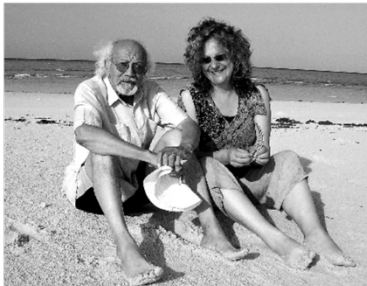




LEFT: Zena Setember;
MIDDLE: Reg with sons Mark and Jehan; **RIGHT:** Mark and Peter September who died in childhood



ABOVE: Reg September with Hettie September (nee McCleod); **BELOW:** Reg in Antananarivo Madagascar 8/8/1985 on the 30th Anniversary of AKFM.(Independence Congress Party of Madagascar, in Malagasy - Antoko'ny Kongresi'ny Fahaleovantenan'i Madagasikara) **BELOW RIGHT:** Reg September and Melissa Steyn on the beach in Zanzibar. [All photos FA]





LEFT: Reg, pensive and deep in thought; **RIGHT:** Reg September with Rev Michael Weeder, now Dean of St George's Anglican Cathedral of Cape Town. [FA]



LEFT: Sindiso & Rita Mfenyane with Reg & Melissa. **RIGHT:** Reg paying tribute in Columbus Cemetery in Havana, Cuba, at the plot honouring heroes. Alex la Guma's grave is the one in the right corner of the photo behind Reg. **BELOW LEFT:** Reg at SOMAFCO Memorial for deceased comrades, Tanzania. **RIGHT:** Reg and Peter Ntite at Nelson Mandela's 90th Birthday function, and below with Mac Maharaj. [All photos FA]



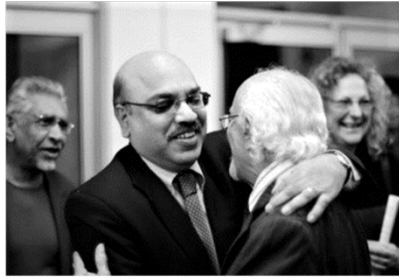


Reg September, a **“Companion of Oliver Tambo”** was an unassuming, thoughtful, diplomatic, servant leader and champion of the poor, who grew old gracefully.
[Photo at 60 courtesy Omar Badsha; and at 80 [Family Album]



ABOVE: Reg September and other ANC leaders doing a lap-around-the-stadium to greet the crowds at ANC rally in 1991 [Photo courtesy Omar Badsha photographs];
BELOW: Reg always ready to listen to others – (left) Reg at conference with Makho Njobe (right) with one of Melissa’s students Buhle Zuma. [FA]





TOP LEFT: Reg and Constitutional Court Chief Justice Arthur Chaskalson. [FA]

TOP RIGHT: Reg with Justice Siraj Desai and Mac Maharaj and Melissa Steyn. [FA]

MIDDLE LEFT: Reg with Franklin Sonn. [FA]

MIDDLE RIGHT: Reg with Dr Richard "Dick" van der Ross who was a fellow founding member of the SA Coloured People's Congress. [FA]

TOP LEFT: Reg with Kay Jaffer. [FA]

BOTTOM LEFT: Reg with Pregs Govender and Ralph Freese. [FA]





TOP: Melissa Steyn and Reg September with Nelson Mandela.

CENTRE RIGHT: Melissa Steyn and her beloved husband Reg September. **CENTRE LEFT:** Ronnie and Eleanor Kasrils with Reg September.

BELOW: Trevor Manuel and Reg September on the occasion of his birthday. [All photos FA]



7

Local activism and starting an International Solidarity Front

For Reg, engagement in mobilisation started on the workplace floor as a young apprentice, then as a simple trades union member and later as a full-time organiser working to extend union membership and take up shop-floor issues. This progressed to engaging in the burning issues of the day, such as the anti-Coloured Affairs Department mobilisation and protest, and the anti-Coloured Advisory Council protests, building a union federation of non-European workers, through to the anti-Apartheid legislation protests against race classification in the *Population Registration Act*, the *Separate Amenities Act*, the *Group Areas Act*, the protests against segregation of public transport, and many other new oppressive laws. This led him on to the Defiance Campaign and other activities involved in the struggle.

These activities ultimately led to Reg September's arrest, to treason charges being brought against him and finally pushed him into clandestine activity, trying to create a tactical vehicle that could win over those labelled as Coloured to their rightful home as part of the greater African people to whom they belonged.

The very first practical political engagement Reg had was mass action in 1939. White nationalists utilised the centenary of the Great Trek to mobilise and push for legislation to compel municipalities to cut back the 36 percent

of residential areas that were mixed at this time, and to segregate all European and non-European residential areas.

The European residents' associations publicly lobbied for such an enactment and Jan Smuts and Hertzog made speeches supporting full residential segregation. A new draft ordinance for segregated residential areas was published in 1938 with the aim of having it passed for approval by April 1939. At the same time the National Party launched a mass petition campaign to urge parliament to enact comprehensive legislation for the complete social, economic, and political segregation of races in South Africa. This was followed by support for the principle of social segregation by the Minister of Labour and then a proposal for a servitude-scheme by the Minister of the Interior.

What the latter meant was that if 75% in a neighbourhood of property owners wanted residential segregation, government would then register a servitude on the title deeds restricting ownership to one race only.

Under the leadership of the National Liberation League and the Non-European United Front led by Cissie Gool, James la Guma and Johnny Gomas, a counter-petition and mass protests were organised to oppose segregation, and the NLL organised a Conference against Segregation to form a United Black Anti-Segregation Front. This attracted the participation of 30 organisations, which united on a platform against any law which would discriminate against Native, Coloured, Indian, or Chinese and declared that an injury to one weakened the position of all.

On 26 March 1939 there was a gathering of 3 000 at a pre-protest prayer meeting in Wynberg as part of a National Day of Prayer. Then on the 27 April, around 15 000 people gathered in protest in Cape Town and 5 000 in Kimberley. The NLL-NEUF protest in Cape Town ended with Cissie Gool leading the Committee of Action and 4 000 marchers on parliament carrying

flaming torches, and an almighty clash occurred between protestors and the police, who attacked the crowds violently.

Reg was in the thick of this protest, which was his baptism of fire. The protests were followed by further mass meetings where a slightly watered-down set of the political aims and objectives of the National Liberation League were adopted by the Non-European United Front. There was also a commitment by all affiliates not to interfere with the internal affairs of any of their fellow organisations in the front.

The goals were clearly established – equal political, social, economic, and industrial rights for non-Europeans. To this end the tools and tactics included boycotts, demonstrations, passive resistance, and strikes. This new approach was fast eclipsing the African Political Organisation of Cissie Gool's father Dr Abdurrahman, although the APO could still claim to be the organisation with the largest number of members. The APO still followed a softly-softly gentleman's approach, which was close to the liberal element in the United Party.

After seven very productive years of energised resistance, by 1942 the NLL had gone into decline, but it had laid the basis for a totally new revolutionary form of political action and organisation. There was a demonstrable shift out of the realm of political dominance by intellectual elites to a new era of trades union organisation, growth, and action, and to the organisation of the youth in the ANC and the CPSA. They entered the world of ideas and discourse with a bang, and took to the streets in concerted protests directed against government and the captains of industry.

As World War II came to an end, both organised labour and the politically organised youth rallied around the concept of national liberation and made it their own. The core of national liberation ideas, and the ideas of united fronts or alliances formed across boundaries got a new lease on life in

the ANC Youth League formed in 1944 and in the trades union movement. It started in 1941 with the formation of the Council for Non-European Trades Unions (CNETU) and the formation of the African Mineworkers Union (AMU), followed by bus boycotts in 1942 and 1943, and finally by the 1946 miner's strike. The year 1946 was a watershed in resistance in South Africa. In the ANC, the Youth League's moment of truth happened in 1949, when the face of the ANC was radically changed. Liberationist politics and mass mobilisation crystallised in leaps and bounds after 1946 and 1949. This was also a result of the assumption of power of the National Party in 1948 and the implementation of Apartheid as their ideology.

Reg September had come through his induction period in the political and trades union arena at a time when a paradigm shift was taking place. His apprenticeship in the factory, as well as his induction in the political and organised labour arena, would stand him in great stead by the end of the 1950s when another major paradigm shift would occur. The fundamental lessons he had learnt about radical-leftism and the negative disruptiveness that came with it braced him for the 1960s in London when he was helping to lay the foundations for one of what became known as the four pillars of the resistance strategy, namely mobilisation of international support for the liberation struggle and isolation of the Apartheid regime. Also, the lessons learnt that differentiated the platforms of narrow nationalism and national-socialism, from an anti-colonial national liberation platform, would assist him in dealing with a conservative nationalist phenomenon in the ANC that continued to emerge militant almost every decade from 1949 to the present, but involved him centrally in the late 1960s.

Reg was nurtured and mentored carefully into the trades union arena and then into the CPSA by Ray Alexander, Moses Kotane, Jimmy la Guma, and Johnny Gomas. Union work was not for the faint-hearted and it carried a lot

of risks, not to mention that it did not bring in much money for subsistence. He was also nurtured by a number of white mentors such as Prof Jack Simons the husband of Ray Alexander and by Wolfie Kodesh an ex-serviceman and communist who worked on the left newspapers, *New Age* and *Guardian*. These would be lifelong friendships and comradeship that continued when both of these men continued into the exile years.

Reg made special mention in one interview about Prof Jack Simons. Jack and others like George Sacks, editor of the *Guardian* newspaper, who gave lectures and political classes at the “Friends of the Soviet Union” after World War II had ended, and also at the People’s Club.

Reg says: *Jack Simons was a chap who made sure that he ran classes on political economy. Yes, and I made sure that I was one of his pupils. He was a wonderful lecturer, and I developed a very close relationship with him, which lasted for the rest of his life. Oh, both here and also in Lusaka in later years.*

At the Kabwe Conference it was Jack Simons who raised the matter of the widely held myth that the ANC had excluded Coloured people from membership from its inception. He said it was just not true because the ANC defined an African as anyone who had at least one forebear indigenous to Africa. He also pointed out that James la Guma and John Gomas were both office-bearers in the ANC in the 1930s.

Jack was actually more clued up on these facts than I had been. The ANC was a very small organisation in Cape Town when I entered politics and I was not fully conversant with its early history, even though I knew James la Guma and John Gomas very well.

While Reg was away from Cape Town in Port Elizabeth (today Gqeberha) and doubling up as a correspondent for the *Guardian* newspaper, Reg kept in touch with his journalist mentor Wolfie Kodesh in Cape Town during 1948 and 1949 as the *New Age* newspaper succeeded the *Guardian*.

Reg simply changed over like everyone else and was writing for *New Age* as its PE correspondent. Of course, he continued to work for both the National Union of Distributive Workers (NUDW) and the Textile Workers' Union. After the birth of his daughter Zena, Reg, Sakeena his second wife, and the baby returned to Cape Town at the end of 1949.

Reg had this to say about Wolfie Kodesh: *Wolfie was what one could call an Afro-European. He did not conform to being 'white'. He showed in practice what it meant to be a human being and what it meant to be a foot soldier with no special hierarchical position in a liberation movement led by Africans. His affinity was undivided in favour of Africa and Africans.*

Although by 1950 it became very dangerous to follow the communist path, Wolfie continued his political activity, mainly through the Congress Alliance led by the ANC and within the developing clandestine arena of struggle. In the 1950s Wolfie worked tirelessly along with others throughout the country for the underground SACP and the open Congress Alliance, focusing on the need for it to sustain itself in its campaign work. These were the days of the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, the Treason trial, and the run up to the banning of the ANC.

*Wolfie Kodesh had many hats, one of which was being a journalist. He and Athol Thorn were initially the directors of the *New Age*, which had succeeded the *Guardian* after its forced closure, and was later banned. There followed a succession of reconstituted newspapers with different names until finally, the National Party devised a new law which banned all the staff on these newspapers from any future involvement in any form of the written media. I had worked for the *Guardian* and for *New Age* as a correspondent and Wolfie, a WW2 veteran was one of my mentors.*

*Wolfie worked with Ruth First, who was also an investigative journalist for *New Age*. The two of them did some really risky work together. Two of their best*

stories included the disclosure of the mass killings of workers on Potgieter's potato farm and an exposure of the Broederbond. The feature on the potato farm graves was a dangerous on-site investigative story and finally led to a public outcry and a countrywide potato boycott, led by the ANC.

When Reg and Sakeena were back in Cape Town he related: I immediately got involved with Cissie Gool in establishing the Franchise Action Council. I was the Secretary and Cissie Gool was the Chairperson. Sundra Pillay, Sam Kahn, Mr Nagia, and SM Rahim are some of the other names that come to mind as being on the committee.

The FRAC was formed to oppose the removal of the Coloured people from the voters' roll, disenfranchising them. I remember this as a time of organising my first mass demonstrations. Whereas before I had just been one of those willing hands to do any of the huge number of tasks involved in mass-mobilisation I was now directing others and making sure that everything worked as planned. Without even realising it, I was no longer a follower but working shoulder to shoulder as a young leader alongside those who had mentored me into the role.

With the dissolution of the CPSA, the leadership figures still consulted and directed resistance work and had taken a decision that I would be sent abroad to attend the World Peace Council in 1950 or the next one in 1952 as it would be good for a younger delegate to represent the party and the Trades Union Movement from South Africa. The USA was drumming up war mongering talk and socialists and communists countered this by establishing the World Peace Council with Frederic Joliot Curie, the eminent physicist, as its first President. In April 1949, a meeting designated the World Congress of Partisans for Peace with 2000 delegates from 75 countries attending in Paris, was the first foundation meeting. Then in 1949 the new permanent secretariat called the World Committee of Partisans for Peace met again to organise a Second World Congress which was

held in Warsaw in November 1950, and this is where new name World Peace Council (WPC) was adopted.

The WPC had attracted the support of Paul Robeson, W E du Bois, Picasso, and other such eminent names. It was at the next meeting in 1952 that it was thought it was time that I had exposure to the world political stage and arranged for me to represent South Africa at the WPC in Vienna in January 1952.

CPSA member and artist Gregoire Boonzaier, agreed to sponsor my trip, but I unfortunately was kept hanging after applying for my passport and missed out on going to the conference. Towards the end of the year after I was issued with a passport, it was decided that now that I had the passport and sponsorship, I should still go abroad to England for a brief period, to work with a fellow communist and supporters there to begin to put together a solidarity group, as we could see that the time was fast approaching for the banning of the CPSA. We could even see the beginnings of a draconian police state and the curtailment of the ANC and other organisations.

I thus accidentally became a co-founder of the first proto foreign mission of the liberation movement – a Solidarity Committee, the first of many stages towards the later formation of the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

Reg was given a special mission abroad when he was sent to London to link up with Vella Pillay in London. This excursion abroad casts him together with Vella Pillay as pioneer African liberationist diplomats from South Africa to the UK.

At the time Reg September would have been unaware of just how historic this role was that he was embarking on together with Vella Pillay, which smoothed the ground over a decade later for OR Tambo's mission to establish a presence on the international stage for the liberation movement and an Anti-Apartheid Movement support organisation. Effectively Reg September became one of the first two pioneers of black South African

diplomatic outreach to the world. Later in 1969 Reg would be appointed as Chief Representative of the ANC in London for Western Europe.

With the CPSA now banned, former party members and the ANC had seen the writing on the wall that it was only a matter of time before the banning of all black opposition political parties and organisations that opposed the Apartheid regime. Blacklisting and banning of individuals, house arrests, political trials and imprisonments would become the order of the day. It was foreseeable that a mass exodus of people fleeing repression in South Africa together with the need to run clandestine structures and organisational apparatus would also have to be resourced. Breadwinners who were victims of these forms of repression would find that their families upkeep, shelter, education and so on would be at threat and impoverishment would be the high price of opposition.

Though the CPSA had disbanded, and a communist party was now also banned in South Africa there were consultations between former party members in consultation with the ANC around building support structures abroad. The former communist network therefore took a lead in mid-1952 in arranging that Reg September should go on a mission to help establish a support organisational network in London that would work towards building mass-support abroad to raise financial and material aid for the struggle in South Africa. It would also build political support for strategies to isolate the Apartheid regime and build popular solidarity support for the struggle of the South African people. And thus, the Solidarity Committee for a Democratic South Africa (SCDSA) was formed in London by Reg September and Vella Pillay.

No other political organisation in the country had such foresight, nor took such action in advance of what was to come. Later OR Tambo acknowledged Reg's early role by using him and his earlier work in the

solidarity arena to establish the first ANC mission in the UK. By the time that PAC and APDUSA and other organisations arrived in London seeking solidarity support, the ANC and SACP had already built structures and strong networks and relationships there for over a decade – something that other organisations did not understand at that time.

Much later in 1969 the liberation movement would adopt a four-pillar strategy of which this pioneering work of Reg September would be one of the pillars – to build international support for the struggle, solidarity aid, and to isolate the Apartheid regime globally through sanctions and other such means. After a tempestuous 1960s decade for the now exiled ANC, in 1969 Reg September was recognised for his pioneering work and made the Chief Representative of the ANC in the UK and Europe. The worldwide Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM) as the successor to that first Solidarity Committee for a Democratic South Africa (SCDSA) and a chain of structures over the years connecting these two phases, can be recorded in history as the largest and most successful of all forms of solidarity globally in any cause seeking worldwide support. The International Defence and Aid for Southern Africa established by Cannon Collins and Archbishop Trevor Huddleston to aid families of political prisoners and others victimised by the Apartheid Regime was another of the initiatives that was rooted in the foundational work of Reg September and Vella Pillay's SCDSA.

Reg and Sakena Dollie in the 1940s were living at her family home, which had its own difficulties for their relationship. For whatever reason, known only to Reg and Sakena, it was decided that Zena would accompany Reg on his trip. In 1952 Reg and baby Zena travelled by boat to the UK, disembarking at Southampton, and made their way to London. It was quite amazing that Reg travelled alone with Zena, and living in London where he

looked after his daughter on his own. For those times, a father taking on that responsibility was a rarity.

Melissa, Reg's wife, relates what Reg told her about his time in London: Reg worked in London at an umbrella shop, which served the gentry. He had plenty of stories of that experience. How a Lord 'Somebody' came in, took an umbrella, said, 'Charge this to my account' and walked out. They all had to put their heads together to work out who it was, but he always remembered the sense of self-importance of someone who could do that, just assuming that everyone had to know who you were.

He also used to tell of the way in which they were paid. You were given a time, exact to the minute, say '4:47pm', at which you had to knock on the manager's door and collect your pay, and you had to be absolutely on time. He obviously had no respect for people who treat others in such a demeaning way.

Melissa also made an observation about Reg and Zena, from the discussions she had with her husband. She says: He took Zena over to London with him. He was very proud of the fact that he did it on his own – telling how she threw her bottle over the railing of the ship while they were travelling abroad. He adored her as a little girl, and I think a lot of it had to do with the fact that he had spent that time in London alone with her.

As far as his political role in London was concerned, Reg had the following to say: *I had gone to stay with Sakeena's brother, who was a chemist in London, and stayed there until I found a place of our own after I found a job in the West End of London selling the finest umbrellas and hunting supplies.*

While in London from mid-1952 through to mid- 1953, I teamed up with the British Communist Party and other fraternal structures. I joined with fellow comrade Vella Pillay and others to form the first Solidarity Committee for a Democratic South Africa (SCDSA). This was an important rear base for

logistical support for the CPSA, the ANC and other democratic organisations as it was nearing the time that all black opposition would be faced with the decision of being shut down or banned. Effectively the SCDSA was the beginning of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the ANC Missions Abroad, and a clandestine future that would last 40 years, and in time ultimately become the liberated South Africa diplomatic missions in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Vella Pillay, also a member of the CPSA and the SA Indian Congress, had arrived in London by 1950 and settled into a job and set up family home. We both in 1952 had been given credentials by former CPSA leaders and the ANC to embark on establishing a solidarity support vehicle for the struggle. The party later in the 1960s was not happy with Vella's strong relationship with China, and this caused some tension and his drift away from the party because we were strongly aligned to the Soviet Union. He and his wife Patsy Pillay, who worked in the Indian High Commission, remained a lifetime in the UK, and I will ever appreciate their kindness in my first time in the UK. Besides the work we put into the SCDSA, Vella went on to establish a South African Students Association (SASA), a London New Age Committee (LNAC), the South African Freedom Association (SAFA) and the Committee of African Organisations (CAO) with its first Boycott Sub-Committee. I learnt so much from Vella about how to establish organisations, and organisational development, that would later assist me greatly after I got back home in the establishment of the SACPO in September 1953. Others who would later join this pioneering solidarity building effort, in time included Frene Ginwala, Abdul Minty, Rosalyn Ainslie and Ethel de Keyser. Canon Collins' Defence and Aid Fund was also later established by 1959 and there was cooperation even with the non-racial South African Liberal Party at the time. So, the networks built with British organisations ranged from the Communist Party of Great Britain, the British Trades Union Congress, and the Labour Party through to the British Liberal Party and Christian Action.

Vella by 1953 was also working for the Bank of China and had a network of South African friends as well as sympathisers with our cause in England. I also engaged with the Jamaicans and Malawians to begin to build up a solidarity network. My time in London was not without incidents. The long arm of anti-communism followed me, and I was visited and questioned by the British Special Branch.

While I was in London, my mother died, and this was a great loss to me.

When we returned to South Africa the entire scenario had changed. I had been away for over nine months from mid- 1952 to May 1953. During this period, I was closely in touch with the ANC and we were germinating a plan to form a Coloured People's Organisation in the tradition of the early APO of the period 1902 – 1915. The plan came to fruition in September 1953.

Already 1950 we saw the Suppression of Communism Act introduced, as well as the Group Areas Act, the Population Registration Act, and the Separate Amenities Act. Apartheid hit South Africa and its people and life would not be the same again. After June, I was declared as a listed communist by the regime, and prepared for the worst. When I went to London, I was already very much a marked individual by both the security police in South Africa and by British intelligence.

Reg and Zena re-joined Sakena. They would have another child together – Jehan. But after a couple of years, they were divorced. Reg noted this as a second failed marriage remarking once to me that: *We had been moving from pillar to post, had no abode of our own and lived with comrades, family, and friends most of the time. All our comrades led such nomadic lives in service to the struggle and made many sacrifices. You know from your own difficult experience what it was like.*

Marriage was a casualty in many a couple's life and caused much pain and turmoil for our children. We all wished that our family life could have been different, most especially for the sake of our children.

8

The police state and the S A Coloured People's Congress

White South African politics had gone through a process of refinement from the time of the imperial “representative” government, established in 1853, to the granting of “responsible government” by the British Crown to the Cape Colony in 1872.

From inception, responsible government was a forum for the vested interests of the moneyed and powerful in the Colony, and after the Union of South Africa was declared, the super-rich owners of business, mining and agriculture dominated and played a game with the electorate in which they bought support at the polls, sometimes subtly and at other times quite overtly.

Racial ordering and class and colour issues were a popular means for the super-rich and British imperial power to ensure that they had a significant sector of the voting public on their side. The liberal constitutional order unravelled piece by piece and due to its internal colonial and racist contradictions, its logical conclusion was predictable: an Apartheid neo-fascist police state.

In the Cape Colony the voting public with a qualified franchise were in two camps: an aspirant white population intent on realising prosperity on the backs of the non-white population, and a tiny propertied class of

educated African people split as Native and Coloured who had to vote for white representatives.

The powerful forces in mining capital dominated from the time that Cecil Rhodes formed the Progressive Party (PP) backed by mining interests. After the Union of South Africa was formed, the Progressive Party threw its weight behind the dominant faction in white nationalist politics – the South African Party of Louis Botha (SAP).

Its opposing faction among whites was the more extreme nationalists in the National Party (NP) allied to the Labour Party (LP), which beat the SAP (South African Party) and PP (Progressive Party) alliance in 1924. The Nationalist-Labour Pact government increased its grip on power in the 1928 elections. The two factions – SAP and NP/LP – then temporarily found each other, creating a new political party, the United National Party, which then had a liberal and conservative wing.

This dominated the political climate right up to World War II. During this period a whole range of white protectionist and segregationist legislation was enacted by the Smuts government, through which those labelled Natives were stripped of their land, the few rights that they had in law and their right to vote on the common voters' roll in the Cape. Those labelled Coloured, Malay, Indian and Chinese also faced a barrage of racist legislation and the curtailment of their freedoms.

With the war there was a split between the mildly liberal section of the white United National Party and the conservative section of the party. The conservatives quickly put together the re-instituted National Party that opposed Smuts' involving South Africa in the Allies' war against the Axis countries.

After the war, in 1948, the conservatives now simply calling themselves the National Party (NP), in alliance with the Afrikaner Party (AP), won the

elections on a pledge to voters that they would establish an Independent Republic and an absolute separation of all spheres of life into white and non-white compartments – Apartheid. The UNP, which by then called itself the United Party, lost the elections and went into steady decline.

The NP/AP alliance further declared that the state would not tolerate communism or black nationalist movements. The National Party/Afrikaner Party alliance with its Apartheid ideology also began to purge the security apparatus and replace military and police officers with ideologically aligned people to enforce their ideology and suppress all opponents.

There was a brief period of three years, 1951 to 1954, when a white protest movement of demobilised soldiers who had fought in World War II, calling themselves the Torch Commando, protested against the erosion of constitutionalism, against the removal of the “Coloured” vote, and the introduction of Apartheid policies. The term “Torch Commando” was derived from one of the North African campaigns against the Nazi Army, the Torch Campaign, and the protesters carried torches high during the marches.

Those who founded the Torch Commando were the left-wing Springbok Legion, and a few elements from other servicemen’s organisations. There was heavy involvement behind the scenes of the United Party and former CPSA members. The United Party CPSA talks were facilitated by a UP supporting Springbok Legionnaire by the name of Vic Clapham, who arranged the talks about uniting in action against the rising neo-Nazi police state, with communist Springbok Legionnaires Jack Hodgson and Cecil Williams. It was agreed that the fighter-pilot ace of WW2, Adolph “Sailor” Malan, became the President of the Torch Commando and that a neutral name be adopted for the joint campaigns – War Veterans’ Action Committee

(though the informal name Torch Commando was popularised as a protest tactic).

The United Party unfortunately broke their word on non-partisanship and hijacked this initially non-partisan protest movement in the hope of using it to defeat the NP/AP alliance at the next elections, but the NP and AP merged and engaged in gerrymandering by changing constituency boundaries that favoured the NP and consolidated its grip on power. They had wanted Sailor Malan to be their Prime Minister candidate as they believed he had popular appeal just like Jan Smuts as a military man. Sailor Malan refused to be drawn into party partisan politics.

Reg September came under the mentorship of a number of the red soldiers of the Springbok Legion like John Morley, Cecil Williams, Jack Hodgson, Joe Podbury, Joe Slovo, John O'Meara, Jack and Rica Hodgson, Rusty Bernstein, Jock Izakowitz, Wolfie Kodesh, Brian Bunting and Fred Carneson. These men often entertained younger members of the liberation movement with stories of how they engaged in battle with the Nazis and Fascists in WW2.

At its height the Springbok Legion had 65 000 members, but it is important to note that most were not as radical as its leaders. This difference between the beliefs of its large membership and those of its leaders would lead to its slow decline after the war, and when the Apartheid regime raided the Springbok Legion offices in 1952, it was dealt a death blow. The Springbok Legion was one of the first casualties of the new police state. Few young political activists today know about the left-wing and non-racial resistance symbolism of the springbok emblem which they only associate with rugby, and not as the emblem of black and white soldiers on their caps and on their gravestones who lost their lives in the first and second world

war. Nor do they associate it with what was called the soldiers union – the Springbok Legion with its anti-racist and socialist platform.

Adolph “Sailor” Malan as a result of turning down the offer by the UP, and its patron Harry Oppenheimer, to be its leader replacing Jan Smuts and for opposing DF Malan’s nationalist bully boys, was isolated and purged from historical memory. He was a Battle of Britain spitfire fighter pilot, war hero and anti-Nazi, who was dismayed at seeing Nazism on the rise in his homeland.

While a significant though small number of white individuals were prepared to take a strong stand against the rise of the police state, only three movements would develop involving white South Africans that opposed all forms of Apartheid, namely the non-racial Communist Party which was banned and reformed clandestinely, the Liberal Party which was forced to disband by 1967 because it had a non-racial membership and leadership, and the Congress of Democrats (COD) who fought for universal suffrage, the institution of legal rights and an end to the racist police state. The COD joined the Congress of the People, which included the ANC as the leading organisation, the SACPC and South African Indian Congress (SAIC) as a united front. The COD was submerged into the broad liberation and anti-Apartheid movement over time and disappeared as a distinct movement.

By the end of the 1950s, a minor splinter developed in the UP, which led to the rebirth of the old Rhodes party of mining and big corporate interests: The Progressive Party (PP). Ultimately, it had one Member of Parliament for over a decade. This was the feisty conservative libertarian, Helen Suzman, who championed observation of human rights along with a conservative formula of a qualified franchise for persons of colour, based on property ownership and education, as well as the lifting of the colour bar in all aspects of life. The PP initially supported some liberal concessions but

did not go as far as the liberals in the Liberal Party and did not open its ranks to people of colour. Later down the line it simply became a home for various splinters occurring on the road to the demise of the United Party. By the 1990s the main rump of the PP tradition called itself the Democratic Party (DP).

It is notable that many of the left within the Springbok Legion went on in the next decade to become founding members of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) – Spear of the Nation. A fair number of white activists were banned, exiled, imprisoned, and lost their lives in the struggle.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the Franchise Action Council, of which Cissie Gool was the chairperson and Reg September the secretary, spearheaded the resistance to the removal of the Coloured franchise. A year after the formation of Franchise Action Committee (FRAC), Reg left for London. In his time away everything had changed in South Africa, and at a personal level, Reg's dear mother, Flora Schilder September, had passed away while Reg was in London.

Reg remembered having a deep sense of sadness at this time. He talked of his disquiet on returning from London at seeing non-Europeans and whites in separate queues, and the polarisation between Coloured and white on the one hand and the polarisation of Coloured and Native on the other hand, resulting in a clear fissure between the two, which now seemed impossible to bridge. Attitudes hardened both through the new African consciousness of the majority and in the Coloured minority. It was in this environment that the South African Coloured People's Congress (first called the SA Coloured People's Organisation) was formed, with Reg playing a leading role.

Within the Coloured communities there had been a degree of collaboration with the state from among the tiny middle strata conservatives

who were at the other end of the swing of the pendulum from the far-left. Reg would say that whereas the far-left had made it their hallmark to boycott any and everything on principle (except for their government jobs and paymasters), there were those from the same professional strata and state-employee sector who took on the appeasement role of tentative collaboration. Their aim was to present themselves to the regime as being educated and reasonable gentlemen who believed that they might achieve significant concessions. They believed that by being amenable to negotiation they might possibly forward the upliftment of their communities.

Essentially there were four variants within coloured communities: the liberationists, the trendy radical-left, the conservatives and then those middle-grounders who just stayed out of politics or were sometimes prepared to take small actions of protest. They had different characters in different locations in the urban areas, rural areas, and different parts of the country.

The new era dominated by repression saw another risk emerge for the left in the form of sell-out state-witnesses in political trials, collaborators, spies, and infiltrated security police agents who were in the midst of those in the struggle – the enemy within. The earliest of these included men like Gerard Ludi and Pieter Beyleveldt in the SACP and SACTU. Even ANC President Moroka treacherously sold out his fellow ANC and SACP trialists in the 1950s. This problem was very real and impacted negatively on many lives. Reg felt that those researching and writing about the past needed to be truthful about this ugly past and was concerned that some modern-day publications, such as that written about ANC President Moroka, whitewashes out the treachery.

Besides those who unconsciously promoted such outcomes, or sometimes through their behaviour gave people away to the new security

police apparatus by their foolishness and self-indulgence, there were also conscious efforts by some to sell others out for whatever reason motivated them. In some cases, it was through the security police using blackmail and fear tactics, but in other cases it was for social and financial advantage.

The police state was characterised by an active special branch of security police following, spying, telephone tapping, interception of mail, use of dirty tricks, detentions of activists, torture, political show-trials, killing of activists, house arrests and bannings, and sentences for political activities, banning of literature and the left newspapers and so on. This would get worse over time with death squads kidnapping and executing activists, bombings of people through mail-bombs and bombing of homes and institutions. From the 1950s a reign of terror just grew and grew over three decades in South Africa.

Coloured politics also visibly changed from the 1940s. Some on the CAC were the residue of the old APO. Since 1943, leading names of coloured high society had steadily been drawn into the CAC, but by 1950 disillusionment had set in as they had made no mark and received no real concessions for all their efforts of gentlemen's handshaking.

Between the far left and the conservatives, each with their own brand of co-operation with the state, there was always an almighty rumpus – blowing of hot air, but as far as Reg could see they were actually very much alike.

The leading names on the Coloured Advisory Committee were Bishop Gow, J. Golding, F P Joshua, David van der Ross, S G Maurice, Papers, Rhoda, de Vries, Heneke, Crowe, Koopman, Davids, Hendricks, van Vuuren, Larey and Ferreira. Reg knew them all.

Whether at the conservative end or vocally radical end of the spectrum in Coloured politics both poles had little or no contact with the working-

class and other underclasses in the Coloured communities or more broadly among all black people.

The tiny number on the radical-left who truly acted on principle and walked their talk, just like the communists, were turned upon by the Apartheid regime, treated viciously and also isolated, leaving the leadership field open to pretenders. To a large degree friends and colleagues of the few radical-left leaders who walked their talk who were once highly vocal were muted and kept their heads down. Many a friendship soured at that time. People like Neville Alexander and Dulcie September found themselves abandoned and on their own when they were arrested and sentenced. A degree of parallel could be drawn with the McCarthy era in the USA when friends abandoned their comrades to the purges. Reg felt that it was an ugly phase in history. 'But we should learn from it,' he said.

Reg believed that there was always a time to draw a line and a time to be harshly critical, but there was equally a need to listen, learn and engage, because nobody and no brand had all the answers: 'Not everything said by someone in an organisation other than your own was wrong and not everything that was thought and practiced in our ranks is right.'

Reg said that he was prepared to work constructively with any of the streams that he critiqued, and indeed tried to, but once he had been let down or betrayed, that group or personality would never gain his trust again. He would say, 'They only got one chance... if their word was not their bond, I had no time for them.' With this backdrop it is important to note that throughout the exile years Reg kept touch with many who he had a differences, including leading figures in the Coloured Labour Party to ensure that the liberation movement kept communication open to all political elements.

Reg explained that one should never simply write people off if they had views and passions to the left of one's own, or to the conservatives either. Writing people off and refusing to work with people who did not share one's perspective was not "principle", it was just plain stupidity. If betrayed, even once, it would be equally stupid to continue in a relationship of trust.

The effects of the Suppression of Communism Act were devastating for many. All communist orientated organisations and communist media and literature were banned and listed people proscribed as communists had restrictions such as banning, and communication curtailment orders imposed on their lives.

White South Africans who remained communist-orientated were victimised and stripped of all white privileges and freedoms. Effectively the political colour red became part and parcel of black. Black liberationists were all referred to as red communists, whether or not they subscribed to communist ideology or were part of a communist organisation. Within a decade, being a communist and/or an African liberationist of any kind, would also earn one the label of being a terrorist.

In terms of opposition to this new draconian political environment, which saw the disenfranchisement of coloured voters and the curtailment of freedoms of movement through pass laws for those classified as Natives or Blacks, a new paradigm of resistance would be adopted. A united congress alliance, called the Congress of the People (COP), would be formed, and would involve mass defiance campaigns of passive resistance.

Under the pretext of removing the "Communist Threat" the Apartheid regime effectively targeted all democratic non-racial opposition and the scene was set for an almighty showdown between a Police State and a broad united front of organisations set on defying the Apartheid ideology.

At the beginning of May 1950, the CPSA faced the introduction of the Unlawful Organisations Bill aimed at outlawing the CPSA and also giving the Minister of Justice the powers to ban and banish. This included victims having no recourse to the courts. Initially the bill did not specifically identify Communists but effectively allowed for all organisations opposed to the government's Apartheid policies to be muzzled and outlawed. This formulation was changed as a result of a huge uproar. The changed bill had a specific focus and title – the Suppression of Communism Act.

The CPSA therefore resolved that, should the bill pass the third reading in the House of Assembly, the party would dissolve itself on its own initiative. The Central Executive Committee would ensure that all district and branch activities ceased to function and that the Central Executive Committee would wind up the affairs of the CPSA. On 20 June 1950 Sam Kahn read a statement in the House of Assembly, where he was an elected Native representative, on the dissolution of the CPSA with immediate effect.

The left-orientated Guardian newspaper, which was not an official CPSA newspaper, was formally banned by the Apartheid regime in 1952. As a result, the Clarion was formed, and when it was banned, the People's World was established. In a progression from there Advance was founded when People's World was banned and then New Age was formed and subsequently banned. From the time that the Suppression of Communism Act was passed in June 1950 right through to March 1963 this left newspaper tradition continued over the next 13 years. None of the press fraternity raised a protest at the banning of the leftist newspaper tradition, and even in communications studies in South African academia there was complete silence about this gross suppression of press freedom. In the history of South African media these newspapers are never mentioned.

Alongside this succession of left newspapers were left periodicals such as *Fighting Talk* and *Liberation*, which kept alive the traditions of the National Liberation League to ensure that political thinking did not retreat into a simple Human Rights Movement or a dangerous, narrow-nationalist approach. Communists like Ruth First and Dan Thloome were the editors of these journals. Reg September regularly contributed to all of these newspapers over that time as a correspondent. Brian Bunting, Lionel Foreman, Fred Carneson, Govan Mbeki, Wolfie Kodesh and Monty Naicker were others who wrote for, produced, and distributed this succession of newspapers.

In my youth in the mid-1970s, I started two micro-circulation fringe newspapers in Cape Town – *Young Voice* and *New Voice*, which were successively banned in similar fashion. Banning of media and literature was a core part of repression. From the late 1970s through the 1980s a left press once more developed on the fringe of the formal media world and a new generation of journalists in the formal media world began to push the boundaries. During this time, I ran the liberation movement printing press in exile, and I served on the editorial boards of some of the journals in the underground press of the liberation movement. In this capacity we often received written contributions from Reg September and advice and guidance, particularly on anything written about Coloured people.

In late 1950 a liquidator was appointed by the state to wind up the affairs of the Communist Party. He sent letters to all former members of the dissolved CPSA as well as to many non-members chosen willy-nilly by Justice Minister, C. R. Swart, and gave them the opportunity to make representations, in respect of the legal rule of *audi alterum partem*, why their names should not be placed on a list of all former members of the CPSA being compiled by him.

A listed person would be liable to have various restrictions applied to them at the discretion of the Justice Minister. What this resulted in was curbs from working within other organisations such as the trades unions, political movements and civil society organisations being placed on listed people. It affected a wide range of seasoned activists. Reg September was one of those listed as a communist. (*As I write this story, I have a file before me with all the state correspondence on restrictions on Reg September*).

This signalled the beginning of South African government becoming a neo-fascist regime and adopting a police state approach. What happened to the CPSA at this point was extended to other organisations within the next decade. By dissolving itself before the final passing of the bill, the CPSA enabled communists to spirit many of its documents out of the country or destroy them and to take the necessary steps towards covert organisation so as to keep a few steps ahead of the emerging security police apparatus.

The Apartheid regime did not really know who all the communists were and focused their attention on the best-known members. Thus, many communists remained active in the trades union movement and in the ANC and other movements. Communists also met secretly as individuals committed to the cause to analyse and plot a way forward. There were differences of opinions. Some wanted nothing to do with associating with communism under circumstances where one's entire life would be destroyed, and they walked away.

Some also believed that there was no need for a Communist Party as there were many other avenues to pursue the core goals. Then there were others who believed that they should vacate the political landscape of organisations and go deep underground to pursue another way of conducting the struggle.

The most dedicated communist cadres ultimately took the view that communists did need an independent, identifiable communist party working

in the underground, using new clandestine methods of struggle, as what they called a “Vanguard Party” with very strict mechanisms in place to protect its members’ identities and its apparatus. But it also adopted the policy of participating actively in public mass movements that were legal. It was a two-pronged strategy of engaging in legal and illegal work. To do so skilfully, there would be some people engaging in clandestine operations where care needed to be taken not to expose them. It was a difficult and dangerous period and people were bound to make mistakes with disastrous consequences. The transitioning from operating within an open society to having to operate in a warlike, Gestapo-type society was taking place at a rapid pace.

This led to the formation of a new underground party called the South African Communist Party (SACP). The SACP now referred to the Apartheid regimes as Nazis and Fascists. The gloves were off, and an illegal party did not have to mince its words with legal niceties. Brian Bunting published a book entitled “*The Rise of the South African Reich*”¹⁵.

But on various fronts, communists were hunted and hounded out of positions that they held, and many were put out of a job, so that they had no means of sustaining themselves, while others disappeared into jails. The trades union movement was badly hit. J B Marks, who headed the Council of Non-European trades unions and was President of the Transvaal ANC, was hit, as was Dan Thloome, the secretary of the CNETUs. Issy Wolfson, the Treasurer of the Trades and Labour Council, as well as Betty du Toit, Eli Weinberg, Willie Kalk and Solly Sachs were all trades unionists adversely affected as listed communists. Regardless of this crackdown a new, left, and non-racial orientated South African Congress of Trades Unions was still able

¹⁵ Bunting B; The rise of the South African Reich;

to be launched in 1955 and continued to operate openly until 1964 whereafter it became a clandestine organisation operating its own underground trades union network right up until COSATU was formed in the 1980s.

Then there were elected members of Parliament and Provincial Councils that were ejected – Sam Kahn, Fred Carneson, Brian Bunting, and Ray Alexander Simons. Sam Kahn had made the best of his time in Parliament before being removed in 1952 as a Native representative voted in by this constituency.

The Apartheid regime wanted a public holiday for 6 April, to be named “Van Riebeeck’s Day”. Sam Kahn opposed this, calling for a public holiday on 1 December instead as the commemoration of the freedom of the enslaved, called “Liberation Day”. He argued that Van Riebeeck was a cheap crook who had been caught stealing from the Dutch East India Company and should not be honoured for his brief sojourn at the Cape and was not the true founder of the port operations of Table Bay. That honour belonged to Autshumao and his people. In reference to “Liberation Day” Sam Kahn said, ‘that will be the day to which the non-European population would attach importance in this struggle that they must still wage against the semi-slavery and serfdom they still undergo in this country’.

The date 1 December 1834 was promoted by Cissie Gool, John Gomas, Jimmy la Guma, Reg September, and others as worthy for remembering the heritage of slavery as Emancipation Day.

Once in place, the Suppression of Communism Act spawned more Police State legislation such as the Criminal Law Amendment Act, the Public Safety Act, Sabotage Act and Terrorism Act. Police State mechanisms granted draconian powers to detain, torture and murder political opponents

as well as the means to declare “states of emergency”, utilise police and military for political ends, and invoke martial law if necessary.

This required a parallel shift in the methods of struggle and the manner in which people organised for maximum effect. The early United Front politics that Reg September encountered in his transition from schoolboy to working life became a major tool of resistance in the 1950s, which allowed for mass defiance campaigns to be unleashed.

It was not just a matter of a draconian Police State coming into being and the suppression of communists. This was also the time when the Apartheid state refined and expanded on Jan Smuts’ United National Party’s previous segregation legislation, and they fashioned these into absolute dictates on people’s lives. The Population Registration Act, the Group Areas Act, Separate Amenities Act, Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, and many more created the conditions that had pertained in Nazi Germany. South Africans were called to take a firm stand to oppose this white minority regime and everything it stood for. This call, initiated by Z K Matthews at the ANC conference of 1953, would ultimately result in a mass gathering called the Congress of the People.

Reg September, back from London, was now thrown into the deep end of political activism as a leader and it fell upon him and others to find a vehicle that could attract, mobilise, and galvanise those labelled Coloured by the regime, particularly the working class but also across the different strata, into united mass action with those fellow Africans labelled Natives.

Similar challenges were faced by those classified as Indian and with that part of the white population that opposed Apartheid. South Africans of Indian heritage already had organisations that had been formed more than a half century earlier in the form of the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) movement that was ready, willing, and able to take up the challenge of an

alliance with the African National Congress. This had already occurred earlier with the doctors pact between Natal Indian Congress, Transvaal Indian Congress and the ANC as represented by Dr Naicker, Dr Dadoo and Dr Xuma.

White people who wanted a non-racial democracy and who would fight for a better life for all were to be found among the now disbanded communists, the Liberal Party, and the Springbok Legion, but they needed a focused organisational form that could work together with others who were herded into racial silos by Apartheid, so they formed a Congress of Democrats (COD).

Those classified Coloured were being stripped of the few rights and the limited franchise they previously enjoyed. Just as those classified as Natives had experienced two decades earlier, they had no united organisational approach and were torn apart by divisions. The divisions manifested in a range from conservative tendencies to radical-left tendencies. Participation in politics was largely among the middle-class elites and the few who were unionised. Then there was also a prejudice towards Natives among sectors of this strata and even among the working-class. It had been inculcated over a long time by whites in their divide and rule tactics.

As a result of the historic subjugation of the San, Nama, Korana, Griqua and Cape Khoe people and their conscription into commandos and successive military units, the state had created a mentality of subservience to whites and aggression to those labelled Natives. This had permeated into many social avenues among Coloured people who did not come from a strong resistance tradition. It was something Reg September had encountered as a child and was dedicated to turning around: at every opportunity Reg promoted unity and African pride among those classified as Coloured and Native. Reg focussed on the strong resistance tradition among around 40%

of Coloured Communities rather than the collaborationist tradition. He believed that it was a great tragedy that the original motivations for and the establishment of the African Peoples Organisation had become defunct and wanted to resurrect it and its founding ethos and culture.

In 1953 the ANC had called on Reg and others to create a similar vehicle among the Coloured communities as had been manifested in the form of the SAIC and the white Congress of Democrats. Those who drove the formation of the SACPC included veterans of the African Peoples Organisation who saw the new organisation as a reconstituted APO which since its foundation in 1902 had often met together with the ANC, planned together, campaigned together and together with the ANC and South African Indian Congress went on deputations to the British Parliament. The APO had become defunct and those setting out to revive it, believed that it needed a new name and constitution. Its leaders had to go and sell it to the community and the APO legacy that it carried had gravitas in communities across South Africa. The ANC also needed to show its constituency that as an organisation, the SACPC carried the legacy of its earliest partner – the APO. It was a tall order for Reg and his comrades to create a political vehicle to promote unity among Coloured people and unity between Coloured and other organised South Africans, particularly those labelled Natives. Within Coloured communities, political divisions were the dominant feature. However, some more conservative voices such as Dr Richard van der Ross came on board with the idea of a revived APO and sold it to many outside of the left tradition.

It was a task to which Reg put his shoulder to the wheel. In many ways Reg was a very similar personality to Matthew Fredericks the first General Secretary of the APO who had a similar task at hand so many years earlier. Those founding leaders of the SACPC who were brought together were not of one mind about the new creation either, and Reg was pressed to use his

persuasive powers, hard work, and organisational abilities to the full. Slowly and tentatively people began to buy into the new organisation that literally took on the mantle and historical legacy of the APO by first calling the new formation, the South African Coloured People's Organisation (SACPO) rather than 'Congress'. The road to forming the SACPO was a rocky one.

In the early 1950s, within the political arena of those classified Coloured, the once mass rooted African People's Organisation (APO) still existed but was on its last legs. The Coloured People's National Union (CPNU), and the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM) dominated among the elite, and the Franchise Action Council (FRAC) made up another constituency, which was more national in character. FRAC was a broad front of civic, trades union and grassroots political organisations that cooperated in opposing the Separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951 and participated in other anti-apartheid campaigns and activities, including the Defiance Campaign of 1952.

Reg September was the General Secretary of FRAC and Sundra Pillay was its chairman, but in the latter part of 1952 until May 1953 Reg was on the mission abroad. This formation also cooperated with the CPSA while it still existed and with the ANC on the one hand, but also with predominantly white protest organisations like the Civil Rights League (CRL) and the War Veterans Action Committee (WVAC), which organised the Torch Commando, on the other.

FRAC's closeness to the ANC and its involvement in national campaigns involving civil disobedience did not sit well with either CPNU or NEUM, which were not open to joining with the ANC, SAIC and emergent COD. This left only the APO with which to nurture a relationship.

The intention of the ANC and its allied national organisations was to develop a nationwide, coordinated Defiance Campaign involving all sectors

of society – Native, Coloured, Indian, and White. A Joint Planning Committee (JPC) was set up to prepare for the Defiance Campaign. The ANC extended its invitation to the APO to join the JPC as the old, historical, national organisation organising within the Coloured communities. The APO had only 18 members at its last conference in 1951 and it turned down the ANC invitation because, small though it was, it was now also divided along CPNU and NEUM lines. The APO demanded that the ANC should first adopt NUEM's 10-point programme, which of course was not going to happen. The APO disintegrated, with its President Rahim and some others giving their support to FRAC. Indeed, FRAC also had some from the CPNU enjoying cross-organisational membership.

But with this state of affairs, the ANC was sitting with a problem, because FRAC was not a national representative body. FRAC responded to this challenge by first passing a formal motion at its 1952 conference to commit itself to the Defiance Campaign and it took a resolution to transform itself into a national organisation founded on similar grounds to the historical APO formed in 1902. Essentially it took on the task of reviving the APO under a new name. It clearly stated that its membership would be open to all races and not just to those classified as Coloured, just as the APO had done when founded. But FRAC itself failed in rallying its constituency to the cause of the Defiance Campaign after literally being sabotaged by the CPNU and the NEUM.

The leaders, Reg September, James la Guma, and others including the cautious Dr Richard van der Ross, called a People's Convention in Cape Town in August 1953. This convention which was held on 12th September gave birth to a long-awaited organisation, the South African Coloured Political Organisation (SACPO). James la Guma was elected as president, Reg September as general secretary, and George Peake of the Building

Workers Union as national chairperson, cementing its links with the African National Congress and its allies. Alex la Guma was elected Chairperson of the Cape branch of the SACPO. Both Reg September and James la Guma were also former communists and immediately both the anti-communist CPNU and NEUM saw SACPO as a rival organisation. SACPO projected itself as a national organisation and within six months had 4 500 signed up members.

The ANC did not fully understand the fragility of FRAC or the new organisation in the making – SACPO. The formation and the different forces that core cadres like Reg had worked hard to bring together was a deeply fragile arrangement.

The ANC immediately insisted that the name should not be Coloured People's Organisation and had to be Coloured People's Congress, representing people classified as Coloured and their interests. Effectively it was a move away from the African Political Organisation's tradition of being non-racial, and it seemed to reflect the Apartheid National Party conferring "race" status on those classified as Coloured as well as the colonial legacy of the de-Africanisation of Coloured people. This was a contradiction, pushed by the ANC politics of the time, and made Reg's job much harder.

The ANC thinking was also due to pressure in its ranks from conservatives who were ethno-nationalist orientated and who ultimately would desert it to join the ranks of Bantustan leaders working within the Apartheid framework.

It was also ignorant and contradicting of the 1923 ANC's alignment with the global Pan African Congress definition of Africans which the APO had already done 21 years earlier. At that time, the SANNC changed its name from Native National Congress to African National Congress and it had James la Guma and John Gomas as members and office-bearers. By the

1950s the ANC had regressed from its earlier progressive organisational approach to a new approach reflecting that of the Apartheid National Party who were winning over some ANC leaders to the “Bantustan” model and race-silo model. There was also a threat from the narrow ethno-nationalists who placed an emphasis on the notion that only those of sub-Saharan ethnic and linguistic roots were “real” Africans.

It was partially this insistence of the words ‘Coloured People’s Congress’ rather than ‘Coloured People’s Organisation’ in the title that gradually and then quickly led to people like Richard van der Ross and others drifting away over time, effectively sabotaging the successes that Reg September and James la Guma had accomplished. The ANC’s retrogressive approach in adopting race-definition, reflective of that of the Apartheid NP, contributed to the rocky start of the SACPC and its ultimate demise. It was a huge price to pay for changing ‘People’s Organisation’ to ‘People’s Congress’.

The tactic of creating four (race-based) congresses that worked together under the leadership of the African National Congress correlated very closely to the Apartheid “Race Silos”. This tactic always held the danger that what was a legitimate “tactical” approach, could metamorphose into an entrenched strategic approach which was no different to Apartheid. The tactic was extremely important and useful for organisational purposes at the time and contributed hugely to build unity in practice. The move was a progressive response to the needs of the time. But unfortunately, it did also play into the hands of negative narrow nationalist forces. Once exiled the ANC actually squandered the sterling work of the Congress of the People, largely due to the destabilisation by a conservative block between 1965 – 1975 which called itself the ANC-African Nationalist.

This con-federal “Congress of the People” approach required great wisdom and astuteness and was an even more difficult personal challenge for

Reg as he came from the tradition of John Gomas and James la Guma who believed that the political home of “Coloured” people was in one united formation of black oppressed. Both were also communists and trades unionists who were pioneers of “united front” politics and the National Liberation League, which first put national liberation on the political map. John Gomas in particular was not initially in favour of the four race-silo approach but as he saw the organisation beginning to mobilise people successfully, he changed his stance and supported the move. He even urged comrades to be sure to have the word Coloured in its name because people had to know that those classified as Coloured were Africans who were part of the struggle for national liberation. So, there was a variety of opinions around terminology.

The worries, the tension and fragility of the SACPO was not a frivolous worry, as time would show, because in time the ANC membership and leadership forgot that this was a tactic and started to entrench the race-silo approach as a principle of membership and leadership in the ANC. The ANC soon began to label Coloured people as a non-African minority and even as a “junior beneficiary of Apartheid”. They lost sight of the quest for unity in action. Reg September would feel the brunt of this when he became ANC Chief Representative in London and came under assault from the narrow ethno-nationalists of the ANC-African Nationalist in the 1960s.

Reg September and others who adopted this tactic also came under assault by the old far-left Unity Movement. Again, the NEUM charged that the SACPC and COP was a reactionary path to follow.

Reg and the others knew that the tactic held dangers, but this was what was required at that moment in history. It was the best tactic for seizing the moment and bringing all progressive people together in united action. This required a vehicle whereby they could associate, take action together, build

up trust and organise. At that time, Reg wisely took this stand in his leadership role, despite its dangers and it did build a large degree of unity in action. The ANC just did not know when to leave that tactic behind and confused a tactic with an entrenched policy.

Reg would later have opportunity as the SACPC consulted representative at the three Morogoro conferences between 1965 and 1969 to argue that those classified Native and those classified Coloured ought to be in one united African National Congress as African brothers and sisters. Because by this time Coloured people were excluded as full participants in ANC meetings, he was only able to put forward views when consulted and had no vote on these matters. Conservative ethno-nationalist forces within the ANC rejected this approach. Reg at that time again would accept the majority ANC view and put his own thoughts on the back-burner, to be raised again only at the Kabwe Conference in 1985.

Schism unfortunately became entrenched in the political domain when it came to the Coloured arena. Regardless of what strategies and tactics were developed over the next three decades, the splinters in coloured politics continued. In the mid-1980s for the first time, Reg would see his life-long dream begin to come true through the United Democratic Front (UDF), where all Africans, whether classified as Coloured or Black, could constructively work together for the common purpose. What's more, in achieving this, the UDF also brought more white and Indian support than ever before into the liberation fold.

The tactic that turned into a strategy lived uncomfortably side by side with the earlier progressive approach of building a single united National Liberation movement as introduced by the National Liberation League, which emerged again positively as the United Democratic Front in the 1980s. The ANC also missed a wonderful opportunity with the emergence

of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), but conservatives and narrow nationalists viewed the BCM with suspicion and did not understand nor embrace its beautiful message and the unity in action which underpinned it. The Black Consciousness movement offered the liberation movement a coherent core unifying philosophy, which it did not have and still does not have.

It was not all lost, however, because after 1976 many youth, imbued with the ideas of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, filtered into the ANC, and began to enhance debate and intellectual advancement to challenge the stagnation that had begun to set in within the ANC. The BCM rejuvenated the ANC in many respects and in time a synthesis of the older thinking of the 1950s ANC began to mesh with new thinking. The changes occurring in the worldwide socialist movement also entered the realm of ideas within the ANC and across South Africa.

Interestingly enough, when the liberationists again won against the narrow ethno-nationalists at the Kabwe conference of the ANC, and more convincingly so than the compromise at the Morogoro conference, it was largely because of the strength and influence of the Communists, the United Democratic Front and organised labour – COSATU. Notably too, these were the same forces that had birthed the National Liberation League, and this was the left arena that Reg had straddled all of his life. The mass democratic movement and the trades union movement on the ground in South Africa really strengthened discourse and debate.

When the ANC emerged from the underground, one of the first things that was impressed upon it was that its logo had to lose the “Congress of the People” wheel (representing the four silos) and replace it with the mine-head wheel, symbolising the working class. There was a strong awareness that it was time to shelve the original tactic which was retrogressively entrenched

in both the Apartheid mind-set into which many had been indoctrinated and in the narrow nativist nationalist mind-set within the ANC.

But at the particular juncture in the early 1950s it was strongly argued that it was a wise tactic to organise a separate Coloured People's Organisation that could work as an instrument towards building unity with the ANC, SAIC and the COD. Progressives also argued that the guarantee that ensured that these were tactics was the presence of a fifth formation in this Congress Alliance, namely the non-racial trades union movement South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), and with the underground SACP playing a huge role within all the formations, the overall strategy was a united push for a non-racial South African democracy wherein there would be hegemony between a left orientated working class and other underclasses. The formation of the SACPO/C was not an end in itself but a useful political tool through which unity in action could be realised, in the spirit of 'united in our diversity'. The ultimate goal would be the people's ability to appreciate both diversity and the ties that bind us, so that they would have a chance of building a new united South Africa.

This new approach heralded the end of the previous "civil rights" approach in South African resistance politics. Political struggle was taken to the streets and workplaces in the form of protest and defiance. The Apartheid regime's response to protest and defiance would by the 1960s lead to a low-level war that would dominate the three decades until the 1990s and engulf the entire Southern African region in different levels of warfare, including conventional war in Angola. It would involve huge losses of life in Southern Africa, in what was a change from a purely South African rights struggle to a war of mammoth proportions, in which various military forces for liberation - Umkhonto we Sizwe the liberation alliance army (MK), the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA aka POQO) the South West

African People's Organisation (SWAPO) and its Peoples Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN), Movement for the People's Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique (FRELIMO), the military wing of the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) – Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA) and the military wing of the Zimbabwean African National Union (ZANU) – Zimbabwe Army for National Liberation (ZANLA) – were pitted against the military might of the South African Defence Force (SADF) in both conventional armed conflict and unconventional guerrilla warfare of different types at different stages of the struggle.

In expressing his own regrets in later years Reg said, 'We all failed in reaching out to the Coloured working class and rural poor and unemployed who were the majority in communities and indeed suffered the same deprivations as those labelled Natives.' The ANC unfortunately tended to view Coloured people based on the image of the noisy tiny urban middle strata.

Dr Richard van der Ross, one of the more cautious and conservative voices of the time, perhaps summarised the situation most tellingly when in his book "In our own Skin – a Political History of the Coloured People" he said:

"The South African Coloured Political Organisation came largely out of a general feeling that there was a lack of leadership and direction among people in the Coloured community. The previous decade had been dominated by Anti-CAD tirades against the CAC members, any people who supported or seemed to support them, and organisations to which they belonged. While this kind of activity passed as politics among those who drew pleasure or excitement from it, it brought about no change in

government's plans. A group of concerned and serious Coloured people came together to seek a more positive direction.”

His latter comment was referencing the foundation of SACPO, but though he was one of the founders he too ultimately abandoned the organisation when it became clear they were on a collision course with the regime and that association with the ANC would have profoundly negative impacts on members and associates. This middle-class elite felt that they had too much to lose.

Reg September's leadership role emerged between 1950 and 1956 when leadership involved being active in many different forums. Reg was active as a clandestine communist, as a trades unionist, in community organisations, in the left newspapers, in the co-ordination structures between the now uniting congresses, and as a founding activist in the SACPC. In his work to motivate the formation of the SACPC, he assisted in the development of a constitution, the drive to build membership, and in integrating its work with that of the other three congresses and the trades union movement, SACTU.

Reg had taken on a mammoth challenge, and it is herein that the “giant” within the man would emerge. All of this action would come to a head in defiance campaigns and in the Congress of the People and the Treason Trials. Ultimately it led to the banning of all high-profile opposition movements of non-Europeans.

Before concluding this story of the founding of the SACPO it is perhaps also important to note concisely some of the nitty gritty details of its formation and who the leading characters were.

On 12 September in 1953 a public meeting was called at the Garment Workers Hall in Salt River, to put to those in attendance the idea of establishing a new organisation that would champion the interests and opposition to Apartheid of Coloured people. The leadership of this initiative

was Reg September, Dr Richard van der Ross, James la Guma, Henry Carelse, Ned Doman, and others. A message of support came from John Gomas who was under house arrest. Alex la Guma joined the SACPO soon after its formation and was elected as the SACPO Chairperson for the Cape and as such was part of the national executive. James la Guma was the first President of the SACPO and George Peake was the National Chairperson.

Richard van der Ross¹⁶ tells us that the aims of the SACPO were:

- To organise, unite and lead the Coloured people of South Africa in the struggle for the attainment of democratic rights.
- To organise and rally the Coloured people against any attack upon their political, economic, and social rights.
- To support all other sections of the South African people in their struggle against oppression; and
- To co-operate with all organisations for the realisation of the above aims and objectives.

Reg September as General Secretary believed that such a simple framework provided a means to appeal to the broadest sections of Coloured communities and he was right in that very quickly SACPO had 4 500 members paid up. It was purposefully designed not to be open to narrow ideological schisms or become a vehicle for narrow left interests. Its constitution also had no racial bar on membership. The Freedom Charter was formally adopted after the Congress of the People, and became an addendum to the SACPC constitution.

Interestingly the term Coloured did not bother the participants and leaders at that time as much as it has in later years. The attitude was that

¹⁶ Van der Ross R; *In our own Skins – A political history of the Coloured People*; pg 130; Johnathan Ball Publishers; Johannesburg & Cape Town;(2015)

everything could be dealt with in its own time. What was important was to keep alive the issue of de-Africanisation of those classified as Coloured and Reg certainly kept alive this struggle for the recognition of Coloured people as oppressed Africans. (In the USA at the time the term 'Coloured' had not yet been replaced by 'Black' or 'African-American').

By the time the Black Consciousness Movement arose, politicised youth were more or less unanimous in rejecting the term Coloured, opting rather for the unitary term 'Black' as meaning 'all people who were not white or were non-European,' and were claiming their birth-right to be seen as Africans. The ANC, however, pandered to the narrow ethno-nationalists and never handled this issue coming from the Coloured youth in a positive manner. A great moment in history was lost.

The Apartheid regime very quickly nipped in the bud the use of the term 'Black' as meaning 'all persons who were not white or were non-European' as it posed the greatest threat to Apartheid's racist silo system. So, very quickly the Apartheid regime began to use the term 'Black' with a narrow ethnic meaning as being those of predominantly Sub-Saharan African descent. The regime killed two birds with one stone in that they also got rid of the term 'Bantu', which they had used as a replacement for 'Native', in line with their racist propaganda. The Apartheid regime then began an "education" campaign aimed at coloured youth to indoctrinate them that they were not black, but bruin (brown) and only so-called 'Bantus' were Black. Many bought into this Apartheid-line, and referred to themselves as "we blacks" and "we brown people" and adoption of the Botha-formula is widespread in use to this day.

This boosted the "ethno-nationalists" in the ANC, but it also affected those who proudly presented themselves as the Coloured component of the liberation movement. Fairly quickly the ANC developed a language where

the term ‘Black’ coincided with the Apartheid regime’s ethnic use of the term. The ANC also more emphatically used the term ‘African’ in a narrow exclusive manner, which only recognised those who fell into the Apartheid silo reserved for those who at different times were called Natives, Bantu and now Blacks. The ANC followed suit and excluded Coloured people from being seen as Africans, and some in the ANC, particularly of the “native-nationalist” tendency, referred to Coloured people as a non-African minority, thus robbing Coloured people of their African birth-right, just as the Union of South Africa government did in 1911.

These issues were hotly debated throughout the 1970s and 1980s and the roots of the debate were said to be the formation of the SACPC, which was only ever supposed to be a short-term organisational tactic in response to the imposition of strict Apartheid race-silos.

If one goes to the original preamble to the constitution of SACPO/C, one finds that it actually dispels the notion that the SACPO/C in itself had given any kind of approval to seeing Coloured people as a separate entity from other Africans as per the Apartheid paradigm. The real twist came about through the heated exchanges within the SACPO/C and between narrow ethno-nationalists both inside the ANC and outside of it.

By ‘ethno-nationalist’ it is meant the ethnocentric, xenophobic, political approach of promoting the interests of those considered to be the only true native Africans, namely only persons of so-called “pure” sub-Saharan African descent against any perceived to be the “other”. Contextual to South Africa these would be only sub-Saharan peoples speaking any of the Bantu family of languages correlating to those so identified under Apartheid as “Blacks”. As such and according to the ethno-nationalists, Coloured and Indian South Africans, whether or not they had indigenous African ancestry, did not qualify and were “othered” as non-African minorities. Ethno-

nationalist also refers to so-called “tribally” or group-nationalist orientated politics.

Reg totally rejected the notion that Coloured people were not Africans. He always clarified that the fact that “*we are*” should not be confused with “*what we call ourselves or what others call us*” and the fact that “*we are*” should not result in us distancing ourselves or cloistering ourselves from other Africans or in insulting others.

Importantly nowhere in the SACPO/C constitution was there any endorsement favouring “Colouredism” as an ethnocentric endeavour. But peppered throughout the document the words “Coloured People” are clear and so is the name “Coloured Political Organisation” (later Congress). This was intrinsically tactical and for general understanding towards mobilisation. In the constitution there was no race or colour bar to membership.

It clearly states in Section 3 (a) of the SACPC Constitution that *Membership of the SACPC shall be open to ALL PEOPLE over the age of 16, who subscribe to its programme and constitution.* Likewise in the ANC’s first Constitution in 1923 there was no bar on “Coloured” membership nor any leadership exclusion, in that it was said that an African was anyone with at least one indigenous ancestor – and this was a birth-right. When the SACPO/C was established, in its constitution, it identified its flag colours as the same colours as the African National Congress and in the order of black, green, and gold where black represented the people, green the land, and gold the mineral wealth and resources. The preamble wonderfully presents the diverse and painful heritage components, and in it the Coloured experience jumps out clearly and simply.

It is noteworthy that in the preamble to the SACPO/C, clarity is given to what was seen as the situation of those labelled Coloured including their aboriginal African roots.

The preamble and the constitution were only developed after the Congress of the People and its adoption of the Freedom Charter in 1955. But it is appropriate to provide it at this point in this biography. Reg September had a huge hand in the drafting of the constitution, particularly the preamble, which indeed encompassed all the facets of everything that he believed in.

Extract from the preamble to the constitution and programme of the SACPC:

“The Coloured people, descendants of the original inhabitants, imported slaves, and white colonists, have, over the 300 years of their history, no less than any other section of the population contributed to the development of the social, economic, and cultural life of South Africa, and can therefore lay just claim to their rightful heritage – freedom in the land of their birth.

Contrary to the idea that “Emancipation of slaves” in the year 1834 brought freedom to the Coloured People, history has shown that “emancipation” had only made possible the imposition of a form of servitude far more subtle, deadly, and dangerous than that experienced by their ancestors in pre-emancipation days.

When in 1834 the chains of chattel slavery were struck from their limbs, our people stepped forward upon the path towards their rightful heritage. Today we face only disillusionment, poverty, and discrimination. The stifling atmosphere of slavery still pervades our environment.

The mine owners, big farmers, industrial capitalists, and foreign imperialists, who compromise the modern ruling class, in order to facilitate the exploitation of the working masses and to prevent the development of competition from among the non-European people, have employed the classic method of divide and rule, instituting a system of colour oppression and racial prejudice in South Africa, based upon the fictitious superiority of white people and the so-called inferiority of non-whites. Within this social structure Coloured people have a place.

The ruling class do not intend to permit us to rise to equality with our white compatriots. Laws bar our access to economic upliftment, trade, and commerce. Colour prejudices strangle our aspirations to culture. Inferior education stifles the future of our children, herded into slums, and crushed by poverty, prematurely aged, prey to germs of disease. Taxation without representation in the governing and administrative bodies of the country, systematic deprivation of the franchise and other rights previously held in the Cape, and denial of ordinary citizenship rights in other provinces, as well as an intolerable burden of oppression and exploitation which is daily being added to, is the lot of the Coloured people.

Without bread, the franchise and equality of opportunity, there can be no freedom. After a century we must still fight for that freedom which could rightly have been ours in 1834.

Our non-white brothers are much worse off than we are. Pass laws and slave education strangle their desire for progress. Laws deny recognition of their Trades Unions. Robbed of land, franchise, and all human rights, herded into locations and ghettos, denied the right to free trade and commerce, to travel freely, they are inflicted with the stigma of inferiority and burdened with every form of oppression.

The oppressors, controlling the political and economic life of South Africa, show no sign of conceding any democratic rights within the present framework of society to the non-European peoples. There is no indication of their acceding to the just demands of the people of South Africa.

The SACPC is of the opinion that the continued oppression of the Coloured people is no longer tolerable; that it is no longer desirable to limit themselves to passive acquiescence under the increasing burden of discrimination and oppression [and] that a determined struggle in alliance with other oppressed and progressive people must be carried on.

The SACPC believes firmly that the cause of such a struggle can only successfully conclude with the realisation of a new democratic order in South Africa, based on government by the people, with full guarantees against all forms of discrimination for all sections of the people. The SACPC believes firmly that the basis for such a society is contained in the provisions set out in the Freedom Charter adopted by the Congress of the People at Kliptown, Johannesburg, on June 25th and 26th, 1955. The SACPC pledges itself to work unwaveringly until the changes set out in the Freedom Charter have been won.”

In all the time I and others have known Reg, this was also his personal Manifesto. (Hence this excerpt is also in italics.)

There are two important elements of the struggle during this time, among the many, that deserve to be highlighted in terms of significance – the Mayibuye Night-school Movement and the treason trial that occurred as a result of the defiance campaign.

While there is no direct evidence or anecdotal story of direct contact between the Brazilian left educationist Paulo Freire and South Africans when he was first developing his work in the 1950s, Reg indicated that Ray Alexander, Kotane and others had contact with the Communist Party in Brazil, and mentioned that they were impressed and influenced by the advice and encouragement of Francisco Juiao and Clodomir de Morais, who were trade union and peasant league leaders. There was some exchange of views and experiences of the night schools in South Africa and comparable initiatives in Brazil.

The CPSA and trade unionists in the night schools had developed by trial and error a similar approach to that which emerged in Brazil. Left educationists in Brazil were however much more advanced in developing a science and replicable political framework for this approach. These efforts

in South Africa came to be known as the Mayibuye Night-School Movement.

The left engaged in consciousness-raising for workers while teaching literacy and numeracy skills and introducing workers to reading. All political and trade union leaders were expected to conduct classes at different times, using their experiences and sharing workers' experiences. The efforts put into running night schools not only built relationships of trust between activists and workers, but also provided skills that truly freed people. To read, write, count, and better understand the world around you and to be able to know exactly how you were exploited was greatly empowering.

Ken Luckhardt and Brenda Wall, in their history of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, *Organise or Starve*, tell how experienced trade unionists in the mid-1950s gave education classes as informal teachers. They name communists like Reg September, Becky Lan, Fred Carneson, Oscar Mpetha, Ben January, Ray Alexander, Brian Bunting, Norman Levy, and later Ben Turok in this role.

Given the demands of family life, the huge amount of political organisational work he was doing, and the fact that he was working under repressive conditions showed just how Reg walked the talk in politics.

The night school movement was one of the progressive activities that fell victim first to the introduction of the *Bantu Education Act* in 1953 and then finally to repression by 1963. It is notable that in the Western Cape, where such a lot of attention was paid to education among workers, the majority of treason trialists were trades unionists, and that the leadership of the ANC in the region were mostly working-class leaders. Of the seven top ANC leaders in the region, five were labour leaders – Archie Sibeko, Elijah Loza, Zollie Malindi, Bernard Huna and Looksmart Ngudle. Reg September, also a trades unionist worked with all of these leading ANC and trades union

leaders and believed that walking the talk was rooting oneself among the working people and being a servant to the people. He was highly committed to education and learning and argued fiercely against anti-intellectualism. By the 1970s three of the named labour leaders of that time had played a direct role in my own life as a working-class activist. They had spanned a number of generations.

Cape Town and its countryside towns had some of the most amazing working-class leaders who helped to shape Reg September as much as he contributed to shaping new leaders. Some of these were Ben Baartman, Christmas Tinto, Dora Tamana, Ben January, Annie Salinga, James Booyesen, Norman Daniels, Maggie Booyesen, Elizabeth Mafeking, and Lizzie Abrahams. This is the context in which Reg September and his ideas should be seen. He was involved in major political efforts, but his feet were planted firmly in the world of the working class.

The formation of the SACPC came just a month after Professor Z K Matthews of the Cape ANC called for a mass gathering of people from all population groups in South Africa as a People's Congress to draft a people's charter of rights, which would articulate the kind of South Africa that they would like to have. The following year, in March 1954, a meeting was convened at Lower Tugela, where Chief Luthuli was banished by the regime, which brought together the ANC, SAIC, SACPC and the COD. This meeting, which included Reg September, took the decision to hold meetings all over South Africa in urban and rural areas, where people could make known their grievances, demands and dreams for the future.

These would be recorded and then given to the organisers of the Congress of the People to be drafted into a Freedom Charter. This process became a year-long campaign involving masses of people across South Africa. It culminated in 3 000 people attending the Congress of the People

in Kliptown on 26 June 1955, and included national groups, all faiths, organised workers, academics, and the broadest cross section of South African society. This was despite the regime creating many obstacles including roadblocks to thwart people getting to the rally.

In December 1956 the Security Branch of the police swooped on a total of 156 activists across South Africa and charge them with high treason. The arrested activists were from the ANC, SACPC, SAIC, SACTU and the COD, all the participant organisations in the Congress of the People rally. Of the 156 there were 105 classified as Natives, 21 classified as Indians, 7 classified as Coloured, and 23 classified as White who were imprisoned, charged, and put on trial. Reg September was one of the trialists along with Nelson Mandela and others, after he had been bundled into a plane at Ysterplaat military airbase with his comrades and flown to incarceration in Johannesburg at the prison fort.

This became the second largest treason trial in South Africa since the Jij Rebellion trial of enslaved and Khoe rebels in 1808. The British Labour Party at this point released a statement condemning the arrests, detentions and trial and were the first internationally to label the Apartheid state as a police state. The charges said that the defendants were subversives and that the Congress of the People gathering at Kliptown had promoted Communism, the creation of the Freedom Charter, the need to seek help abroad and appeal for the raising of money to buy firearms to overthrow the state.

By the following year 17 December 1957, the Attorney General dropped charges against 61 and the trial continued in stops and starts whereby at each stop another batch of defendants saw charges dropped and were released. By 1958 another 60 defendants were released with charges withdrawn. The trial then collapsed in November 1958, but resumed again in January 1959 when

91 people were re-indicted for conspiracy to endanger and overthrow the state based on the 1955 Congress of the People gathering and the adoption of the Freedom Charter, and by April 1959 another 61 were re-indicted. This was a second bite at the cherry for the state. By January 1959 the judge had found large holes in the state's case of 'conspiracy' and so most indictments fell away. The fiasco continued to 29 March 1961, with only 28 defendants left on trial, when the Judge ruled that none were guilty of treason and were discharged. The Judge also found that the prosecution could not show that the ANC had become a communist organisation.

9

Prison, bannings, armed struggle and journey into exile

We the people of South Africa,
declare for all our country and the world to know,
that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white,
and that no government can justly claim authority,
unless it is based on the will of all the people...
we the people of South Africa, black and white together,
equals, countrymen and brothers, adopt the Freedom Charter.

– 26 June 1955 Congress of the People

While the South African Coloured People's Congress, in its founding document, represented Reg September's personal manifesto in brief, the Freedom Charter encapsulated the many other aspects of Reg's personal beliefs in a much more comprehensive manner. It is a simple yet nuanced set of claims and commitments of the entire South African population and represents a national vision. It was drafted in a unique process involving piles of bits of paper where ordinary people scribbled their desires about the kind of South Africa that they wanted. It makes no distinction between Native, Coloured, and Indian. All non-Europeans were regarded as black. And it also presented the people of

South Africa as “Black and White”. It says, *‘We the people of South Africa Black and White.’*

The Freedom Charter was the defining document of what was meant by National Liberationism as distinguished by narrow ethno-nationalism and even by the singularity of the ANC. It represented a bigger vision than the ANC vision on its own or that of the ANC as an organisation, being the centre of the defining vision of South Africa. At heart it put’s South Africa and all of its people FIRST!

People and their empowerment for the first time were put at the centre of political vision by all political movements opposing the Apartheid State.

The period 1955 to 1969 saw many momentous events in liberation history in South Africa and all of these cannot be captured in detail here. But it is important to note that Reg September was a significant role-player in many of these events, and was affected by them in an indelible way. Reg September was held in high esteem by the African National Congress and by this time was a national leadership figure in the broad liberation movement.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the banning of the CPSA, the listing of its former members as targets of banning and other restrictions, the formation of the SACPC and the Congress of the People, the Defiance Campaign, and the marathon treason trial had seen a decade where the character of the struggle changed significantly.

In Reg’s personal life, as with those of his comrades, it was a huge period of upheaval, facing arrests and detention, court cases, restrictions as a result of banning orders, being constantly spied on by the security police and being harassed.

Politically it was also a very productive period where unity of purpose and mass mobilisation were achieved across the ‘race’ silos created by

Apartheid. Activists from all communities were working together in resistance to an extent that had never been achieved before.

In 1959 Reg was imprisoned for five months without charges. His security police file and his writings show him being moved from prison to prison during that time – Roeland Street prison in Cape Town, then to Worcester, and Paarl. He had previously during the Treason Trial of 1956 – 61 been imprisoned for some of that time at the Johannesburg fort.

In April 1959 Reg 's divorce from Sakeena came through from the Supreme Court. This was Reg's second divorce, which was followed in 1959 by Reg remarrying his first wife Hettie McCleod.

By this time Reg had already had his baptism into prison life at the Johannesburg Fort along with 156 others, including O R Tambo and Robert Resha who were locked up with him. "*Resha taught me how to clean a cell,*" said Reg with a chuckle.

Reg laments the break-way from the ANC of the Pan African Congress faction: *But in 1959, the decade ended on a sour note, when a break-away grouping within the ANC established the Pan-African Congress. Their grievances were expressed in divisive language, saying that the ANC had been undermined by the birth of a multi-racial Congress Alliance and the adoption of the Freedom Charter and then entrenched this charter into the ANC constitution in 1958.*

This was the last straw for the PAC faction who then accused the ANC of entering a 'union of exploiters and exploited' which had betrayed the material interests of native Africans. All were disparaged by this faction who branded the ANC as being brainwashed by white-leftists and communists. They said that the Africans in the ANC were 'self-confessed lackeys of the white ruling class and Indian merchant class.' For these reasons this faction broke away and formed the PAC.

Much of the disparaging language used against the ANC and the Congress Alliance was not simply the new narrow variant of Pan-Africanism because it resonated with the same kind of anti-communist charges made by Apartheid, corporate and imperialist interests and thus involved CIA mischief and cold war politics.

Reg would explain that the emergence of the PAC had continued a trend of split and agitation that went back to the 1940s, based on a bloc of people espousing narrow-nativism. The first faction in the 1940s which emerged was the Bantu National Congress, which stood for no co-operation with whites, Indians, and others. Anti-communism was a bogeyman used to incite race antagonisms and division. What the Apartheid regime had failed to accomplish by use of bannings, detentions and enforced exile to contain communist thinking had resulted in a USA directed and promoted counterinsurgency approach of sowing anti-communist divisions.

Factionalism along these lines would continue to dog the ANC over the years using narrow ethno-nationalism as a cornerstone. Every 10 years right up to the present “narrow ethno-nationalism” with a tendency toward a political approach globally associated with fascist thinking would cause schisms in the ANC. On face value this seems to have continued into the 21st century. From the mid-1960s to 1975 when they were expelled from the ANC there was the faction called ANC-African Nationalist referred to within the ANC as the “Gang of Eight”.

This same tendency post liberation, using the same language as the ‘Gang of Eight’, again emerged under the Jacob Zuma phenomenon that came to dominate and severely damage the image of ANC after 2008.

According to an article published by the SACP, communists believed that the ANC-African Nationalist tendency which came into its own between 1965-1975 in exile, led by the Gang of Eight, was a provocateur

phenomenon, whipped up by the Apartheid security police and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), simply to destabilise any form of united front that could potentially topple the Apartheid regime. The primary motivation was anti-communism and a pro Bantustan ethno-nationalism based on the notion of an African identity only being that of “pure” Sub-Saharan African lineage. This stereotype notion of African identity mirrored the Apartheid notion of a Bantu race.

The ANC-AN faction was just a step away from those also formerly in the ANC who had become leaders of the Apartheid Bantustan apparatus in South Africa.

Post 1990 many of the Bantustan conservatives re-joined the ANC together and together with the ANC-AN tendency (both expelled and those who remained) were able to rebuild the conservative nationalist legacy within the ANC after 1994.

In the 1960s the old Apartheid Security Police prided themselves on having agents right up into the highest echelons of the ANC. Those interrogated by the infamous General Hendrik van den Berg made mention of his boasts to this effect.

Reg September was alive to this threat and as a longstanding communist was part of the articulation of an analysis of this trajectory. In the 1970s the SACP published a paper in the *African Communist* entitled, “The Enemy hidden under the Same Colours,” in which the SACP went head-to-head with this right-wing element seen as a cancer which, if not aggressively countered, would ultimately eat away the liberationist approach that was adopted first by the National Liberation League in the 1930s and then the ANC in the 1940s. In his paper, “South Africa – No Middle Road,”¹⁷ Joe

¹⁷ Joe Slovo, “No Middle Road,” in *Southern Africa: The New Politics of Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976)

Slovo also conceded the possibility of the future emergence of an exploitative black business class allied to this conservative tendency. He said:

“Since the aspirations of all the main classes amongst the oppressed majority can, at the moment, only be served by the destruction of the economic and political power of the existing ruling class, the question which remains is whether the role of the all white bourgeoisie could conceivably be assumed by a black equivalent in the future which would act to stop the revolution in its tracks and subvert the social aims of real national emancipation. This possibility cannot, of course, be discounted altogether..... a small, (black) commercial class which aspires to greater rights of participation at the top of the exploitative machine together with the traditional elements..... is being offered a vested interest in the fragmentation of South Africa, to stifle the national (liberation) movement as we know it and replace it with ethnic and parochial nationalism.”

As we will see, in the 1960s and 1970s, Reg would personally come under fire from the ethno-nationalist element in the ANC, who protested at the conditional opening of ANC membership to minorities, and to his appointment as ANC Chief Representative in London after the 1969 Morogoro conference. They protested because according to their approach, Coloured people were not Africans, but rather a “non-African Minority” and lackeys of the whites.

This national liberationist vs nationalist struggle was the backdrop to a paradigm shift that had occurred in South Africa and in resistance politics in 1960. Protests broke out across South Africa and a state of emergency was declared, with over 20 000 people being detained across the country. South Africans and the world were shaken by the Sharpeville massacre of 21 March 1960, then followed by the banning of the ANC and PAC.

Reg September was again arrested when dawn raids were carried out on homes after the announcement of the State of Emergency. He spent another five months in detention followed by banning orders which placed him under house arrest.

In the Security Police records on Reg, there are 109 accounts monitoring his every word and action over the decade 1951 to 1962, which resulted in his being listed as a communist agitator and banned. In 1984 a further review by the Security Police was made on Reg when they compiled another consolidated list of people who were a danger to the state, marked “Secret”. This Kompol review is a four-page composite record signed by the Minister of Law and Order, Louis Le Grange, in 1984 and it shows how much of a threat Reg September posed to the Apartheid regime. It is notable that a number of Reg’s contemporaries of the 1950s and 1960s, like Barney Desai, who claimed to be more “revolutionary”, were not on the new consolidated list.

At different points throughout the Security Police reports for 1951 to 1962, Reg is placed in the company of many illustrious liberationists – Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Cissie Gool, Sam Kahn, Dora Alexander, John Morley-Turner, Joseph Nkatlo, Johnson Ngwevela, Theo Snitcher, Eileen Ross, Wolfie Kodesh, James la Guma, Bessie Blecher, Fred Carneson, John Gomas, Ray Alexander, Nancy Dick, Arnold Harrison, Pauline Podbrey, Naomi Shapiro, Jack Simons, John Mtini, Sonia and Brian Bunting, Jack Tarshish, Ruth Fine, Albie Sachs, Alex la Guma, Nita Holland, Sheila Horvitch, Saidie Forman, Cecelia Rosier, Lionel Foreman, Denise Goldberg, Archie Sibeko, Oscar Mpetla, Dr Archie Jordan, Bernard Huna, J Morolong, Leonard Lee-Warden, Zollie Malindi, Jack Barnett, Thomas Ngwenya, Elizabeth Mafeking, Simon Makheta, Ben Turok, George Peake, and others.

The security police were thorough in their clampdown on the left and effectively closed down all of the space left for open opposition.

In 1961 the Apartheid regime also held a white referendum to gather support to break away from Britain and the Commonwealth and declare a republic. The majority of white South Africans supported this, and an independent republic was declared on 31 May 1961.

The Congress Alliance responded to these events by calling an All-In Conference (AIC) which was attended by 1 500 delegates from a broad range of political, cultural, religious, business, labour, and sporting organisations. From this gathering an All-In Action Council was established, with Nelson Mandela as its secretary. It called for the drafting of a new constitution that was non-racial and democratic, and this demand was presented to Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd. There was no response, and a three-day national strike was called. The Apartheid regime responded with further repression.

Between 1960 and 1962 the ANC, PAC, SAIC, SACPC and South West African National Union (SWANU from Namibia) acknowledged that despite differences in the case of the PAC, they faced a common enemy. They formed the South African United Front (SAUF). The SAUF was short-lived as the PAC proved very difficult to work with because according to Reg, they deeply believed that the ANC, SACPC and SAIC were the enemy.

In 1961 Reg September was ordered by the Apartheid regime to resign as secretary of the SACPC – with which he did not comply. This was also the year in which one of his first heroes, Goolam Gool, who later let him down terribly, passed away. Furthermore, it was the year that Reg's mentor James la Guma, one of the founders of the National Liberation League, passed away. Of his other primary mentors, only Johnny Gomas, Moses

Kotane , Cissie Gool and Ray Alexander were still alive and active at this time, but in 1963 Cissie Gool also passed away.

It was against this background that the ANC National Executive Committee gave an instruction to O R Tambo to establish an external mission of the ANC.

On 16 December 1961 the ANC and the SACP further responded by formally launching an armed wing of the National Liberation Movement – Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the Spear of the Nation, which had been formed in stages earlier in the year. Over the next 18 months there were 150 armed actions of resistance. These were all acts of property sabotage. During the Defiance Campaign the ANC had already been moving in this direction in establishing the Amadelakufa (those who defy death) which was known as the “ANC Volunteer Section”. Now that all legal means were exhausted, the ANC launched the armed struggle.

The initial launch of armed resistance was not a great success and did not galvanise the masses to action. It was also very quickly nipped in the bud with the arrest of the High Command at Rivonia. The ANC and MK were on a steep learning curve.

The ANC and MK were to go through many phases and ups and downs, trying classical guerrilla warfare, fighting alongside ZIPRA of ZAPU in the then Rhodesia and later alongside MPLA supported by Cuban troops in a conventional war in the Angolan terrain, within which it had its rear bases. Finally, it fought through “armed propaganda”, where it was part of three other strategies – building an underground resistance with multifaceted tactics; building a mass movement of protest and defiance to promote un-governability; and developing an international front of support together with campaigns for isolation and sanctions against the Apartheid regime. It was

this combination, which took years to evolve, that went a long way towards bringing Apartheid to its knees.

Without the spread of many internal community-based organisations in the 1980s and the mass action of these, any one of the components of this broad strategy would have not had the desired effect. Effectively Internal struggles of various types and external struggles of various types was supported by a relatively small armed force making tactical strikes which deepened the impact of mass actions and campaigns to weaken the ability of the state to effectively govern. Ungovernability became the pivot around which everything revolved as the struggle intensified. Armed propaganda evolved to become a core component for achieving ungovernability.

The ANC's turn to an armed struggle as one facet of the overall strategy cannot be analysed in simplistic terms of 'guerrilla warfare inside South Africa' and neither can its contribution be analysed by simply looking at attacks on military and police personnel. The struggle itself was not going to be only within the South Africa terrain. The entire Southern Africa was involved in the "War against Apartheid". The South African Defence Force (SADF) and Security Police were not simply in a war within South Africa. They waged war throughout Southern Africa. Indeed, they went much further and carried out a bombing in London and assassinations in Europe too. The adoption of the armed struggle did play a very important role within what became known as the strategy of "Four Pillars of Struggle". Reg September and other key leaders played a key role in developing this strategy, led by O R Tambo and many lessons and inspiration had been drawn from Vietnam, more so than from the European communist world.

In 1961 this faltering start to armed struggle had a dramatic impact on Reg September's life. Together with his colleague in the SACPC, Barney Desai, Reg was under house arrest and banning orders. They faced charges

for breaking their banning orders late in 1961. This occurred when they were found or given away for having a meeting with other SACPC members. They were arrested and imprisoned in Roeland Street jail.

Reg September and Barney Desai appeared in the Wynberg Magistrates Court and were defended by Albie Sachs, who managed to get them released on bail.

Reg explains what happened then: *I don't remember where or who decided that we should go into hiding, which we each did separately. I remember being moved from place to place. Who arranged it all, I don't know. The SACP comrades must have worked in cooperation with the SACPC comrades, and it all seemed to work quite well. I remember the late Rusty of Wynberg, husband of Hazel Roberts having arranged some things for me. I also remember Dick Parker's brother having been very helpful, as was the late Peggy Nasson and her husband, Joe. There was a family in the Athlone area who were very helpful and who provided me with accommodation. The last place where I lived was in the Zeekoevlei area.*

When I was about to be sent out of Cape Town, my friend Edgar Maurice came to visit me and brought me a small transistor radio. He will never know just how much that meant to me, putting me in touch with the outside world, in a way in which I had never had the opportunity of engaging before. I was able to follow the China-USSR ideological conflict for instance. At the time I was given a safe-house with David McAdams and his wife. David, who I did not know before, had established the Cape Town boys choir. The house was in the Zeekoevlei area.

After months in hiding on the run, I was then taken to the railway station in Bellville, and that was the last I was to see of Cape Town or South Africa for something like 27 years. On the train journey it turned out that the fellow sharing my compartment was somebody in the hierarchy of the Coloured Affairs Department. Fortunately for me he was more interested in himself and was drunk

most of the time, so he didn't register very much. It was 1962 and my first destination was Johannesburg where I was met by Ahmed Kathrada and his partner Sylvia Neame, and they put me up in a separate little place on the premises of their home.

In the early 1960s when Kathy was dating a white girlfriend, Sylvia Neame, a fellow activist, such relationships were illegal under apartheid laws. Their relationship was bust up by Kathy's arrest in 1963 and he was later jailed for life on Robben Island. Ahmed Kathrada went on trial with Nelson Mandela and ten others that year. In 1965 Sylvia was also jailed for two years for her political activities, and fled from South Africa as soon as she was released. Apartheid took a cruel toll on the personal lives of many. It was as a result of Kathy being arrested one night in 1963 and not arriving at home that I had to move in a hurry to another comrade's home outside of Johannesburg.

This was not for very long, as the original idea was that I would leave from Durban to Dar es Salaam by ship. But after getting to Durban and being hosted at the home of Papi Ramat this idea was abandoned because the vessel was under close surveillance. It had apparently already been compromised. This meant that my only choice was to make for Swaziland.

My trip to Swaziland in March 1963 was quite eventful and getting into Swaziland was done illegally of course. I remember going in the train towards Swaziland. I did not know the area at all, and I didn't wear my spectacles and found myself in grave difficulty. I'd also shaved my head and one chap who was a little more observant than most, when everyone else had left the compartment sat down with me, and asked me whether something was wrong. He offered to assist in any way which he could. I told him my story about how I had to get into Swaziland. He told me which station that I needed to get off at and also directed me to his brother's place. He told me that his brother would show me the direction

to cross the border. That's exactly what happened. Complete strangers were very good to me.

It was night time and once put in the right direction for crossing the border, I was then on my own. It was very difficult of course. I remember that I was very tired. It was dark; pitch, pitch, pitch dark, and I thought that to continue was very risky. Then I met a man on the pathway coming from the opposite direction and he asked me where I was going. I could only remember one name – a town called Hlatikulu. His response was that it was far away. I was of mind to wait until morning and then I saw some lights and found a house and I knocked on the gate. When the people came out, I explained to them what my situation was, and they welcomed me into their home and offered me a bed to rest for the night. I was in Swaziland and the people were very helpful. The following morning, they fetched Dr Conco who was practicing medicine in Goedgegunt in Swaziland.

Dr Conco made arrangements for me to be taken to the capital and I was taken to the home of Dr Alan Nxumalo. In Mbabane I found myself having to report my presence to the British High Commission. I stopped for a while, looking at the building where the Union Jack was flying on the other side of the road. Never did I think that I would need to go to a British High Commission for assistance. One should remember that Swaziland was not yet independent and was still a British Protectorate. I was to remain in Swaziland for almost a year and a half.

While in Swaziland I was not allowed to work as one needed a work permit to do so. But after a while I met various people in the network of South African expatriates and was able to get past this hurdle. I was assisted by a number of people, some of them working for a legal firm by the name of Lovell. Stanley Longen was one of those working for Lovell. He had been a lawyer involved with the treason trials and we had known him in South Africa. Then there was Syd and Martha Kitching whom Hettie had met in Cape Town and who assisted her to join me in Swaziland. Hettie and I had got married again after my divorce

from Sakena. Syd was a Yorkshireman married to Martha who had a farm in Swaziland. Syd Kitching brought Hettie up to Durban and then had his wife take her over the border illegally into Swaziland.

After a few months I managed to get some paid work in the building industry with Ossie Dennis, a good friend and comrade. His wife was also kind to us after Hettie joined me in Swaziland in October 1963. For just a little while we had some semblance of normal life in Swaziland. Both Hettie and I later got jobs with a retailer in Mbabane, Mr Goldblatt, and that helped tremendously even though the pay was pretty miserable. Hettie worked in the provision section of the store, and I worked in the hardware section of the store. Officially we were not working.

But of course, I could not sit on my hands and just lay low in Swaziland. I got involved in rendering some assistance to the local Woodworkers Union which organised the forestry workers. We were not supposed to get involved in local political or trades union issues in Swaziland. Towards the end of my stay a couple of us were charged because we would not sign a document giving an assurance that we would not interfere in the political life of Swaziland or neighbouring countries.

Around the same time, I was detained and charged for participating in a public meeting on the South Africa question. I was defended by Neville Ruben, who worked with Lovell, and the charge couldn't stick, and I was released. This was the signal that our time was up in Swaziland, and we would need to move on again.

The move from Swaziland was pretty swift. I was approached by two people sent by the ANC with instructions to get us out of Swaziland immediately. It was all a bit scary because there was no way to know whether these emissaries were really from the ANC as we had never met before. It could have been a trick by the security police just to get us back into South Africa. In those days we were surrounded by colonial Rhodesia and Mozambique and South Africa. Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland were British Protectorates, and further afield Zambia

was the British territory of Northern Rhodesia. The only way to get out of South Africa, was to again enter it and then get to the Bechuanaland Protectorate (Botswana). From Botswana we needed to go to Southern Rhodesia, then to Northern Rhodesia and from there to Tanzania which was then called Tanganyika. It was a long and arduous journey overland and full of dangers.

Hettie September shed some light on the trip from Swaziland onwards. She said: *We put aside our reservations and left Swaziland and ended up in Randfontein via Benoni. Our escape chain was organised by the ANC, but then it came unstuck when our contact it was reported to us, had been picked up under the 90-day detention laws. So, we had to start from scratch and make our own plans to get out of South Africa. Mary Moodley who was under house arrest at the time, played a very important role in our escape from Johannesburg. It was she who organised the trip to the Botswana border complete with car and guide who took us through to outside Rustenburg and explained how we would make our way over the Botswana border.*

There was an ANC house in Lobatse, and we had to go forward to reach there on our own steam. It was just Reg and I, and we were on foot. We had a small hold-all on our backs and no other luggage. We had to climb over two barbed wire fences. I was actually at a point of collapse when we made it into Botswana, in the middle of a frosty winter. It was very dark, and we slept under a thorn bush trying to keep ourselves warm. In the morning we found ourselves just outside a little kraal and as it got light, we went to the people who lived there, and they organised our trip. They were just local BaTswana people who helped us so much. They first took us with a donkey-wagon to the railway station. We actually missed the train because the donkeys were slow and wouldn't trot in the right direction. Then we met an agriculturalist working for the British government and had no luck getting transport there because he was away. Finally, we found a good Samaritan with a van, who drove us to Lobatse and did so without asking us to

pay him anything. It was a Motswana government official, and we told him that we were refugees.

Molvi Chachalia and Dan Thloome were in Lobatse at that time. The ANC in 1962 had its first conference in exile in Lobatse which had become the first step in the establishment of an exiled organisational presence. In a sense it was the ANC with one foot firmly still battling in South Africa, and the other foot looking for some free space to evaluate, plan and start providing the kind of logistics and revenue required to forward the struggle under the new conditions prevailing. Dan Thloome a leading SACP comrade prepped us and then sent us on our way by train to Francistown.

In Francistown we had to wait to be transported further. The ANC contact's lorry was being repaired so we had to wait for around six weeks. In Francistown we were joined by Ozzie Dennis and Graham Hidelinger. We stayed in the location where Ozzie using his building trade skills built us a room on the premises of the transporter. There was no running water and no toilet. Every morning we would go to the station, have a wash, and clean our teeth, get the newspaper, and then go back to the location. We cooked on a fire.

We finally left Francistown on the next leg of our journey in August 1964. We were 49 people on the truck where forty-five were PAC and SWAPO people and only four were ANC, even although the transportation was owned and operated by the ANC. The first leg was to get to Kasangula, and the route was very sandy, and we often had to get off the truck and push. It took seventy-two hours because of the bad road conditions, and we encountered lots of wildlife. What I remember most is ducking, because every time the truck went under a thorn tree someone would shout duck and we kept ducking.

We spent the night on the banks of the Limpopo River because the Ferry had gone. I was worried about crocodiles, but Ozzie said we should be more worried about elephants. When we awoke the next morning there were dung heaps from

elephants near to where we slept. The ferry arrived and we crossed and arrived in Salisbury.

We immediately went to the British High Commission to register with Immigration. We were not well received. They made us wait all day. After that we went home with our ANC contact where we could have a bath and a meal. On the following day we proceeded on the next leg of our journey which was to Northern Rhodesia, now Zambia. It was a train journey. In Zambia Momori Meer from the ANC met us in Livingstone and Thomas Nkobi, who would become the ANC Treasurer General in exile, met us in Lusaka. From Zambia we were sent by train on our way through to Tanganyika, now Tanzania. But when we arrived at the border our names had not yet been cleared for entering Tanzania. We spent the weekend waiting at the border post, Dudumo, with no shelter and no money. Fortunately, there was a toilet at the border post. We were also now on foot.

The clearance was radioed through to the border post on the Monday, and we crossed the border into Tanzania by foot and made our way to Mbeya with some nuns who kindly gave us lift in their combi. In Mbeya we met a woman there who took us to her house where we were able to bath, and she gave me a change of clothing. We had a great meal and she bought us bus tickets to take us to Dar es Salaam. We stayed with the woman in Mbeya for three days.

We stayed in Tanzania for 5 months doing various chores and working in the ANC office. During this time, we lived with Mozie Moola, Charlie Jassat, Fatima Nanti, Ronnie, and Eleanor Kasrils. The Authorities in Tanzania treated us very well, but the greatest threat was Malaria. We had a big problem with Mosquitoes. Every bite that I experienced turned into blisters and this meant that I was in and out of hospital. The ANC then gave me permission to go to London. Besides the fact that I had this health problem, our two children aged

two and a half and eleven had been left with relatives in South Africa and I wanted to be reunited with them.

It was decided that the children would be sent to London, and I would meet them there. Reg would initially stay behind in Tanzania. But first, because I had been a teacher, I had to do some training in shorthand and office administration, to give me a better chance of working. I also was initially admitted to hospital because of the sores all over my body and I had an abscess on my appendix. I then worked for a while with the International Defence and Aid Fund and the Anti-Apartheid movement.

By this time the ANC had already organised branches on its UK region. Our children arrived at the end of 1965. Reg also arrived before the end of 1965, because there was a cut-off date for South Africans to still get British citizenship and a passport based on it having been a Commonwealth country. One of the results of South Africa declaring itself to be a Republic was its impact on claims to British citizenship. The ANC Chief Representative in the UK at this time was Raymond Kunene.

Reg September and Barney Desai got bail together in Cape Town when facing charges that they had broken their banning orders, and Desai split from Reg. Almost immediately he did not take the same cooperative approach as Reg did in terms of subjecting himself to the discipline of the underground structures for getting out of South Africa, according to Reg. He took things into his own hands and he took advantage of the conditions of the time to assume powers in the SACPC that he had no authority to assume.

Reg said that Desai had not come through the ranks in Cape Town one step at a time, and had not served from lowest structures towards having leadership responsibilities bestowed upon him. Neither had he served in the

trade union movement or in the underground party structures, nor was elected to the executive of the SACPC.

Desai, Reg explained, had an odd background. *"He had been born an Indian South African but studied abroad in India and taken Indian citizenship. He even had an Indian passport, unbeknown to us at the time, as he did not disclose it. Furthermore, he said that he had been in the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress and the Transvaal Indian Congress at executive level, before he got himself reclassified as a Coloured in 1957, came to Cape Town and slowly moved from the periphery into the SACPC. His name did not stand out recognisably with veteran leaders of the South African Indian Congress. There was also record of him holding office in the TIYC or TIC.*

In 1957 it was still too early to get reclassified and in fact at that time 'Indian' was still a sub-category of Coloured anyway, so there was no reason to be reclassified Coloured as Desai had claimed. It was an odd story that made no sense to other Comrades."

Actually, in the 1950s the Apartheid regime only had three race silos – White, Coloured, and Native as had first been put in place in 1911. The new feature was that the Coloured silo after 1950 included seven sub-classifications, coded 1-7 as follows – Cape Coloured (01), Malay (02), Griqua (03), Other Coloured (07), Indian (05), Chinese (04) and Other Asiatic (06).

Later NP Minister Eben Donges, who had a particular antagonism against Indians, created the fourth Asian 'race' silo, separating out Indian, Chinese, and Other Asian. As an Indian passport holder, Desai had dual nationality, and clearly would have been ringfenced as Indian. When the new race-silo of Asians, incorporating Indian, Chinese and 'Other Asiatic' was introduced in the early 1960s this was after Desai having to go on the run.

Reg said that all in the ANC were puzzled about Desai's many contradictory stories.

Political organisational discipline and the need to behave in an unselfish manner, to protect others and the huge inter-reliant networks that took years to develop, meant very little to Desai according to Reg September. In fact, he had not been elected to the SACPC leadership. He had been co-opted onto the SACPC executive committee rather than voted to the position, for a very narrow specific purpose. When the SACPC President resigned due to ill health in 1961, Barney Desai, who served as a co-opted assistant to the aged la Guma, remained on the executive by default, simply because of the upheavals of the time. He then was assistant to Alex la Guma (Chairperson of the Cape Region of the SACPC) on the SACPC executive, who took the place of the late James la Guma as Acting President. Desai was a relative new comer and was not part of the previous years of slowly building up this organisation. He was catapulted to prominence due to his participation during the then recent anti-Republic demonstrations and as a result he was arrested in May 1961 and served with banning orders for five years. Effectively he was an instant and little-known activist.

Reg says that when Acting President Alex la Guma had to leave the country, Desai assumed acting for the Acting President in his absence, but later started calling himself President of the SACPC and taking singular decisions without ever being elected to that position or co-opted by the executive to do so. Effectively neither the executive nor the membership of the SACPC were able to have proper meetings due to repression. Desai himself as a banned person could not effectively function as a co-opted acting SACPC executive. He also appointed his own chosen new Chairperson of the SACPC – Cardiff Marney. Alex la Guma and Reg September challenged the claims with glaring contradictions, as expressed by this duo. The SACPC

executives and members inside South Africa and outside gave Reg and Alex their full support in exchanges of detailed memos.

Desai's lack of discipline, and his individualist, ambitious approach, according to Reg September, were manifested over and over again with destructive consequences. Without consultation with the SACPC, Barney Desai put his name forward as a candidate for election as a City Councillor, and though the SACPC were annoyed, they decided not to oppose his candidature. However, he was not able to take up his seat on the council after winning in the election on the SACPC ticket because he was a banned person.

After bail had been organised for Barney Desai, he was instructed by the SACPC to go into the underground just like Reg until a decision was made as to what would be the best way forward. According to Reg September this was the beginning of Desai's approach of mischief in the SACPC and combativeness toward the ANC and fellow SACPC members which became more evident in exile.

A huge question mark hovered over Desai when he made his own way by sea to Dar es Salaam, not using the ANC underground network's route, and on arrival placed a dubious letter before the ANC purportedly drafted by the SACPC executive, giving him a mandate on what his future work should be. It apparently authorised him to speak as the exiled voice of the SACPC and empowered him to be the one that discussed all SACPC matters. Accompanying this supposed mandate was a report on everything the SACPC had been doing recently. It ended with a request for financial help.

The ANC had been working intimately with the SACPC since its foundation at every step of the way and was fully apprised of its activities and its current status at that time. None of Desai's utterances and letter of authority made sense. According to Reg September, Desai, as a late-comer

to the executive, was not aware that the SACPC had come about as a result of encouragement by the ANC. The concept had been promoted to a number of leaders within the Coloured communities by Reg September and James la Guma and they convinced others of its tactical value. It was not accidental that Reg September and James la Guma were elected to positions of General Secretary and President as the SACPC was their brainchild.

The letter was thus viewed with some caution as to its authenticity, purportedly coming from the SACPC but transparently reflecting the views of an individual or individuals who had no clue about a long line of communication between the ANC and the SACPC. Desai was also completely unaware of the early work of Reg September and Vella Pillay in laying the foundations of the UK solidarity infrastructure a decade earlier and their strict approach to how funding was disbursed. They were not simply going to payroll opportunist requests and ghost organisations.

Desai told the ANC in Dar es Salaam that its ‘propaganda’ was deficient in projecting the views and political activities of Coloured and Indian people. He wanted the ANC to go on a campaign tour to “educate” Africa and the globe about Coloured and Indian minorities. The ANC was not taken in by this very unlikely language as having actually come from the SACPC. The ANC gave Desai the benefit of the doubt but set aside these claims, demands and expressions as being that of an inexperienced individual, after having independently consulted with other people in internal and external structures.

Reg later pointed out that Desai did an almost complete about-turn later in London when aligning himself with the PAC, by accusing the ANC of promoting Apartheid separatism. In fact, the PAC was his second choice after first wanting to head an external Coloured/Indian mission.

The ANC nonetheless at this time cautiously embraced Desai, gave him a point-by-point answer to his letter, and then involved him in some publication production tasks in Dar es Salaam. It was decided that Barney Desai needed to be sent for political and military training to learn some discipline and help him to mature. Hopefully through this he would appreciate how a disciplined national liberation movement had to function.

Two other activists from Cape Town – James April and Basil February – were also arrested in 1963 and were fortunate to be released on bail. They had trained at the MK training camp inside South Africa with others like Archie Sibeko, under instruction from comrades like Denis Goldberg and Looksmart Ngudle, at Mamre near Cape Town. They were charged with furthering the aims of an illegal organisation having been found with “agitation materials”, and charged with sabotage. It was decided that they would be sent out of the country, and the underground network got them to Babla Saloojee in Johannesburg, who then got them through a string of safe houses in Johannesburg and up to Zeerust. They crossed illegally into Botswana and then went more or less the same route as Reg and Hettie September to Dar es Salaam. In Lusaka they met Tennyson Makiwane and in Dar es Salaam they met O R Tambo, Duma Nokwe and Reg September for debriefing. Here the ANC and MK was able to get other perspectives than those of Barney Desai, who was still in Tanzania at the time.

In June 1964, James April and Basil February were sent abroad for military training, and so was Barney Desai, but there was a huge difference between the former two and Desai. When Desai got to Moscow, he basically deserted the group sent for training by saying that he urgently needed to go to London to take care of his wife and children when they arrived.

So, he was returned to Dar es Salaam by the ANC mission in Moscow. Regardless of the ANC believing that Desai was spinning the organisation a

yarn, they arranged for him to get a ticket and a Tanzanian travel document. In fact, Desai could have finished the very short period of military training with the others and still gotten to London before his family arrived. James and Basil went on to take part in active military operations and Basil February lost his life in combat in the Wankie Campaign.

Reg related how, when Desai got to London, he first tried to enter with the Tanzanian travel document, and the British with their usual caution pulled him aside. This happens all the time and then some diplomatic communications would occur, and one can usually proceed. But as soon as this happened Desai pulled out an Indian passport in the name of Rissik Harilal Desai, his actual name, which he had not declared to the ANC or to the Tanzanian authorities. The Tanzanian authorities and the ANC were hugely embarrassed as there was never a need for a Tanzanian travel document and this instance created huge problems for future liberation movement cadres using passports of convenience.

Reg explained that in London, Desai and another SACPC member, Cardiff Marney, met up. According to Reg this duo would later indulge in schismatic actions which made the ANC regret ever having given assistance to Desai. Reg explain how astounded he, Alex la Guman and a fairly large group of SACPC members in London were when Desai claimed that he was the resident of the SACPC and Marney was its Chairperson.

Later in 1970 Desai qualified as a barrister in Britain and wrote a book about himself and his role in the struggle. By this time, he had already moved over to the PAC and his claims were challenged by the majority of SACPC activists still active inside and outside of South Africa.

Reg did not mince his words. He believed that *'Rissik "Barney" Desai was simply an opportunist, wanting to be recognised as a leader-cum-celebrity in the struggle.'*

In 1965 Reg was the SACPC consultant to the first ANC Morogoro Consultative Conference. A second Consultative Conference of joint SACP Central Committee and ANC Executives (including SACPC and SAIC executives) was convened by the ANC at Morogoro the following year, from 26 to 28 November 1966. Reg September by this time was on the SACP Central Committee and still recognised as General Secretary speaking for the SACPC.

Those present at the meeting¹⁸ chaired by OR Tambo were Reg September, Joe Slovo, Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Ray Simons, Moses Kotane, M P Naicker, Moses Mabhida, Michael Harmel, J B Marks, Robert Resha, William Manila (aka Flag Boshielo), Joe Matlou, Alfred Kgakong, Johnny Makatini, John Pule, Joe Matthews, Ruth Mompati, Duma Nokwe, Mendi Msimang, James Hadebe, and Mzwai Piliso.

Then in 1969 a third Special Consultative Conference of the ANC was held in Morogoro. All leaders of “minority groups” were simply non-voting observers at the conference as they were not considered to be ANC members. The character of each of these conferences was different and sometimes historians and political analysts confuse the three occasions as though they were one, because of the venue, and they simply talk of the “Morogoro Conference” of 1969. If one makes this mistake many nuances are lost and people dispute whether one thing or another happened.

At this first Morogoro Conference in June 1965 the issue of what was called the “African Image” was debated. In February of that year the ANC had produced a discussion document, “A survey of the External Mission of the ANC of South Africa”, in which it reviewed developments since 1960

¹⁸ UFH, Liberation Archives, ANC Morogoro Papers, Box 8, File 68, Notes on the meeting 26-28 November 1966, Morogoro.

and tackled various schisms – opportunism, left and right that had emerged under the new conditions of an underground and exiled ANC.

The issue was not simply of “African Image”. It actually was Reg September that had brought to the attention of O R Tambo, that London had seen the mushrooming of emigres and exiles from South Africa who had political profiles and had been members of the SACP, SACPC, COD, SAIC, Liberal Party and other organisations. Alongside these there was ANC members who were also not well organised or of one mind. By far the majority in London were white, coloured and Indians. The PAC and APDUSA and other political, trades union, cultural artists, church, and other prominent people had also arrived in London. All of these were opportunistically hustling for funds and creating political confusion in the broad solidarity arena that had been built over 13 years. While the ANC had various options for dealing with those outside of the Alliance and Congress movement, it also had serious problems within the broad Congress arena, largely stirred up by Barney Desai.

Reg explained that because white, Coloured and Indians could not join the ANC, some wanted to set up infrastructure for their own organisations and this would cause havoc in solidarity campaigning and competition for scarce funding, as well as confuse the struggle message.

Something urgent needed to be done about the issue of ANC membership and state of organisation. Reg believed that the enemies of the liberation struggle were having a field day and that the ANC would lose all of the hard work put in over the years around its strategic initiatives abroad. Reg won OR Tambo’s support for dealing with this concern.

Reg also explained the key role being played in the mischief by Barney Desai and a small coterie of fellow travellers. It was further vital in the 1960s climate that there was no confusion about the character of the struggle being

about African oppression and an anti-colonial struggle and what defined Apartheid oppression and repression. It is this that was encompassed by the term – the African Image, and not simply an ethno-nationalist projection. Some kind of carefully crafted reconfiguration away from the Congress of the People formula for organisation under conditions of legality inside South Africa was needed for the new conditions of exile – a single liberation movement framework.

In 1964 there were a number of SACPC members and executive leaders in exile in London including Reg September, Barney Desai, Ken Jordaan, Benny Bunsee, Ebrahim Desai, Alex la Guma, Hettie September, James Phillips, Cardiff Marney, Maud Phillips, Eddie Ramsdale, Cosmo Pieterse, Blanche la Guma, Dr V. K. Moodley, Mary Moodley, Kenny Parker, Basil Weaich, Amy Weaich, Sonny Ramsdale, Frank Landman, and Olive Landman.

As we have noted, Reg reported that Desai went on a schismatic drive aided by Cardiff Marney as soon as he arrived in London. They, with a few others, attempted to establish an SACPC in exile, contrary to an agreement by the official SACPC structures that the ANC would be the only organisation to represent the Congress Alliance in exile. Alex la Guma had already organised the bulk of SACPC members into a working committee focused on liberation movement work within the Coloured communities, under the guidance of the ANC, and Reg September joined him in this effort – as the real Acting President and General Secretary respectively, both being elected members of the executive, and Reg being the only elected General Secretary.

There was a flurry of correspondence from Desai and Marney to the Chief ANC Representative in London, challenging the ANC position and

that of other SACPC leaders and members. The ANC Chief Representative communicated this to the ANC in Tanzania.

Desai also wrote directly to Reg September in Tanzania. The ANC reacted coolly towards all these attempts of Desai and Marney's to assume authority as a faction within the SACPC, and used the ANC's own network in South Africa to ascertain whether they really were representing the views of the SACPC inside South Africa.

The language used in Desai's communications was regarded as antagonistic, arrogant, and challenging and believed to be serving the personal interests of Desai and Marney, who were desperately seeking personal recognition, putting themselves before the needs of the struggle.

Reg clearly stated that the views of the pair *were 'certainly not a reflection of the relationship back home with the SACPC... We have our machinery in place for communications to those in South Africa and it is working.'* Of course, they discovered after receiving communications from inside South Africa that Desai and Marney had completely concocted both 'sole-mandate' to speak on behalf of the SACPC and establish separate representative structures in exile, and everything else that Desai had put to the ANC. He was simply a loose cannon, according to a document sent abroad from the SACPC leadership within South Africa.

Reg explained that Desai was frustrated by the approach of the ANC and the presence of Reg September and Alex la Guma, in London by 1965 and that they were working specifically in the ANC Office representing Coloured affairs, so he took his drive for recognition into the arena of the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). Reg was actually the mission deputy to the ANC Chief Representative Kunene at the time.

Desai, now openly elaborating the same radicalist political mischief that Reg had experienced in Cape Town in the 1950s, using the assumed title as

President of the SACPC, joined forces with the PAC European Representative Matthew Nkoana and attacked the AAM for its close relationship with the ANC.

Reg September took great exception to this divisive and disrespectful behaviour of Desai's, who did this without consulting the London Committee of the SACPC. Desai was unaware that Reg and Vella Pillay had long before in 1952 been instrumental in founding the Solidarity Committee for a Democratic South Africa (SCDSA) in London in preparation for the repressive era. As such Reg was well networked and was known for his integrity and his status within the ANC - COP fold. The solidarity movement had been built over 13 previous years and all of its key people were linked to the liberation struggle in South Africa and were not naïve.

The "African Image" discourse was a debate that was highly influenced by developments across the African continent. This discourse within the ANC had, incidentally, also been digested by Barney Desai, who rejected any approach that would subordinate the SACPC and in his opinion marginalise Coloured and Indian people within the liberation struggle. The ANC felt strongly that the external mission of the ANC might send confusing messages to potential supporters if it was evaluated simply as a multi-racial civil rights type of movement, rather than a National Liberation Movement, which would not maximise support in Africa and across the globe. The PAC had also already muddied the waters and spread confusion throughout Africa, claiming that the ANC was being mischievously led by Whites, Coloureds, and Indians as a distraction from the "real" African struggle.

It was felt that the liberation movement in exile should not confuse potential supporters in Africa and across the world by projecting the Apartheid race-silo approach where multiple race or colour-based

formations each had international representatives. However, at the same time concerns were raised that if the ANC simply opened up its ranks to whites and Indians in particular, confusion would also be projected as to the nature of this African Independence struggle. It then followed that Coloured people were seen as an anomaly, out on a limb. In this context, the Coloured population and its leaders were regarded by many in the ANC as not being African enough or as a “non-African minority”.

However, in Angola, Tanzania, Zambia, and Mozambique, and indeed across Africa, there was no distinctions drawn between Africans of multi-continental multi-ethnic roots, and other Africans. The issue of whites and Indians however was a big issue across Africa. In the British dominated countries in Southern Africa there was also alarm at communist involvement with what was seen as African Nationalist struggles.

The leadership was highly aware that the PAC had mischievously tried to project the ANC and its Alliance partners as a non-African movement of puppets manipulated particularly by white communists. Cold-war anti-communism was the main tool being used by the Apartheid Regime to counter any sympathy towards the ANC in Europe and the USA.

In the 1960s when jostling for position and sympathy, anti-communism was nakedly used by the PAC and others abroad. Across Africa too, the fear of communism was fanned. It was a very delicate subject as independence movements were steadily making gains in Africa and achieving independence. It was also delicate because there was still significant support for some of the PAC positions within the ANC, where there was a strong narrow-nativist and anti-communist element despite the exodus of some of these to become collaborators and puppet leaders of Apartheid’s Bantustans.

In the 1960s, the Congress Alliance tactics of the 1950s could not operate in the same manner in a totally changed political environment and this

became a major issue. There was a need for one single African organisation that was home for all resisters against the Apartheid Republic, but establishing one was easier said than done.

South Africans, and those in the ANC in particular, were not prepared for a totally non-racial African political movement. Africans were worried that whites and Indians would dominate discourse, debate, leadership and decision-making and turn the ANC either into a civil rights body or into a communist organisation. They also believed that such an organisation would confuse the world and Africa in particular. At the same time, they believed that taking the four separate constituent bodies abroad as the Congress Alliance would sow confusion.

Should these allied organisations remain or should they be dissolved? If so, how would one structure the ANC in practical terms, and organise all South Africans under its umbrella but at the same time project its “African Image”?

OR Tambo formed a task committee to consider how inter-Congress co-operation could be improved or what other model could be used. Yusaf Dadoo, Joe Slovo and Joe Matthews served on this committee. Controversially the committee proposed that the ANC should be open to all Congress Alliance members and a Council of War should coordinate activities of all alliance members. This position was unacceptable and out of touch with African sentiment and a heated and schismatic climate arose. Reg September was caught up in the thick of this scenario.

This debate resulted in the ANC in exile de facto incorporating all South Africans, but there were strong objections, so the debate continued to fester on regardless. The strong feeling was that only Africans (of sub-Saharan African lineage) can decide on the character and future of the ANC. This was another manifestation of the contest between a narrow ethno-nationalist

tendency and the “united non-racial front” advocates that would never go away. Because of the threat to unity, it was decided that the ANC national executive would not be open to Coloureds, Indians, or Whites. In practice, the Council of War would be the forum where leadership, regardless of ethnicity or “race”, would work together operationally.

While the Council of War concept was dropped, a version of it later became the Revolutionary Council. These issues were further debated at a second Consultative Conference in Morogoro the following year.

Reg September, and the SACPC, held a minority view in all these Morogoro deliberations, but Reg was cautious about how he presented this and how far he would go in forwarding his and the SACPC position. He was particularly disciplined in accepting the final outcome that did not embrace his position. Simply put, he felt that Afro-Europeans (whites in the struggle who have an affinity to Africa and Africans) should be excluded from membership of the ANC at this point in the struggle, but that Coloured people who had always been welcome in the ANC as Africans until the late 1940s, and Indians who had a long alliance with the ANC, should be full members. In other words, all non-Europeans should be full members and only the white comrades should be excluded at this point in time. From the time of the NLL in all of his political life he and other associates stood for non-European Unity.

Mindful of the indigenous African-rootedness of oppressed Coloured people, their forebears experience as Africa-Asian enslaved and the experience of discrimination of Indian South Africans, Reg felt uncomfortable that Coloured people were lumped together with whites. Reg argued that Coloured South Africans should be full members of the ANC, as had been the case until the 1950s, when coloured leaders such as James la

Guma and John Gomas were members and office-bearers, as per the 1923 ANC conference definition of Africans.

The International definition of “African” informed the change of name from SANNC (South African Native Nation Congress) to ANC and this established that an ‘African’ was any person with at least one ancestor indigenous to Africa and self-identified on that basis. Walter Sisulu as a personality embodied the fact that the ANC seemed to accept this at one level and reject it at another level. Sisulu’s parentage and that of John Gomas were the same but one was accepted as an African while the other was not. It did not make sense. The African People’s Organisation, used the term African two decades before the ANC adopted the term and it mobilised those classified as Coloured, based on its members claiming African pride.

Reg was acutely aware that the PAC, after first expressing antagonism towards Coloureds was now successfully recruiting Coloured people who he felt should have been with the ANC. Their success came from the fact that they distinguished between white South Africans and black South Africans, and by the mid-1960s changed their approach to embrace Coloured people as Africans. So, Reg argued for the exclusion of whites from the ANC for the time being, and for the ANC to organise itself better by projecting black non-European unity in policy and practice.

He believed that the ANC should be a united black or non-European front, and took a similar position to that of his old mentors who founded the National Liberation League, John Gomas, James la Guma, Cissie Gool, and Moses Kotane. Black unity was a vital component of the National Liberation struggle, and it was a mistake, he felt, that the ANC was placating those who took a divisive narrow nationalist approach by projecting that only race-based “nativist” notions of sub-Saharan ethnicity constituted African identity or black identity in South Africa. This view being imported into the

ANC was no different from that of the Apartheid quisling Bantustan leaders, all former ANC members.

At the final Morogoro Conference in 1969, Reg September only had observer status as a MK/SACP/SACTU leader because Coloured people could not yet be members of the ANC. For the sake of unity, he resigned himself to the win-win compromise decided at that conference, that opened the doors to membership of the ANC by all, only for exiles and not inside South Africa, but excluded Coloured, Indian and White South Africans from becoming executive leaders in the ANC.

Reg September had carefully weighed up the schismatic forces that had entered the exile arena and was doing his best to out-manoeuvre the destructive divisions being sown by Barney Desai and Cardiff Marney, who had made common cause with the PAC who changed their position to embrace all non-Europeans who accepted their Africanist framework.

Reg had by now received a substantial five-page support letter from the SACPC executive and membership who were still active in South Africa. The internal leadership supported Reg September's approach of recognising the ANC as the premier face of the liberation movement in exile, as well as Reg's position of working within the ANC external mission in London representing the principles of the SACPC. They sharply rebuked Barney Desai for his negative attitude towards the General Secretary of the SACPC, namely Reg September. Because of the actions by Desai and Marney (who claimed to be interim General Secretary owing to the Apartheid regime's demand for Reg to stop being General Secretary, and the detention and subsequent exile of Reg September) the letter ended stating that Desai and Marney 'no longer had the confidence of the SACPC nor do they henceforth represent the wishes and policy of the Coloured People's Congress'.

The letter also made it clear that Barney Desai had engaged in misrepresentation, in that they refuted ‘his claim that the SACPC inside South Africa had given him the authority to establish or act as an independent Foreign or External Mission of the SACPC’. They stated that on the contrary, it was their contention long ago ‘that, considering the state of our organisation and the divisions in the Coloured community, it would be unwise to establish official “embassies” overseas to represent us independently. We held that we accepted the leadership of the ANC and its representation of the whole movement overseas.’

They also denied that the SACPC Executive ever gave Desai the mandate ‘to speak as the exiled representative of the organisation and subject to the decisions of the executive’. The communication goes on in much stronger terms describing the claims made by Desai and Marney as never being the views of the internal leadership: ‘We wish to state that we, being old members of the executive, were at no time party to these instructions, whatever they may be, nor were we ever approached for our views.’

The communication also expressed its concern about narrow nationalism, race-chauvinism and approaches that were derisive about Coloured people, current among certain members of the Congress movement overseas. The document chastised Desai for seeking an alliance with the PAC and other anti-Congress Alliance elements and reminded all that the reason that the ‘African Image’ phenomenon was now being championed actually started with the PAC split and its championing of anti-Coloured and anti-Indian sentiment. They made themselves very clear that the PAC was not worthy of SACPC support and chastised Desai for siding with the PAC.

Reg raised his concerns about the ANC with the SACPC back in South Africa. The SACPC rejected any marginalisation of Coloured people by the

PAC and other narrow-nationalist views anchored in the “African Image” discourse. The internal SACPC cautioned that the “African Image” discourse encouraged narrow-nationalism rather than solving problems and associated this with the PAC. This, however, did not mean that they did not see the importance of the ANC being the single external voice for the entire Congress Movement.

Distinguishing Coloureds as a non-African minority was a red flag of which Reg was well aware, but he clearly felt that for the sake of unity in the liberation movement, a compromise that served the conditions pertaining at that moment in history should be embraced.

The SACPC communication from inside South Africa was a very carefully reasoned argument that forwarded a view about the lack of action on the ground by Coloured communities at that time in brutal honesty, saying: “our organisation has been veritably reduced to a shambles by the actions of the police and Minister. Because we did not or were unable to lay a proper basis for work under illegal conditions, we have become organisationally ineffective. As a result, our influence in the community has dwindled and divisions beset our community Under these conditions (elaborated upon elsewhere in the document) it is of little use complaining of the ‘African Image’ as elaborated to the exclusion of Africans labelled Coloured.”

They were explicitly clear that this was not the right moment in time to tackle this issue with the ANC, save as to keep the ANC informed that leaders of the Coloured community had a different view.

The communication recognised that only the ANC was now the leading force in South Africa and this, together with the much higher levels of persecution, had naturally led to a particular expression of nationalism and the resultant ‘African Image’ argument. While understanding this and

accepting the need to work within this framework, the SACPC was clearly uncomfortable with it and its implications if this were entrenched not simply as a tactic, but as a long-term view.

They further stated: “It is not enough to complain about the ‘African Image’ approach and to criticise our friends about their views of Coloured people. To complain is negative, and in order to correct erroneous conceptions of the place of Coloured people in the struggle, in other words, to combat this ‘African Image’, it is for us and the Coloured community to take positive steps to make our contribution known. We feel that the cure lies here at home, and can see no purpose in the purely abstract arguments being conducted by Desai and Marney, for they are abstract in that they do not have a political basis... If these members (in London) were aware of the facts of the situation here in the Cape, perhaps they would readjust their thoughts.”

In all of Reg’s deliberations with the ANC, he was meticulous in representing the nuances of these views, expressed through democratic consultations with the SACPC inside South Africa. Often the nuances were lost in the broader ANC and Alliance formulations and policies.

The Morogoro meeting in 1965 (and again later in 1969) produced a compromise to appease the narrow ethno-nationalist element by the formulation genesis of what became the controversial ANC slogans within Coloured communities – the description of Coloureds as being “non-Africans” and the tandem phrase, “blacks in general and Africans in particular”. This was never the intention of the SACPC, nor indeed of the original thinking in the ANC, mindful that its ranks and leadership positions as far back as 1923 were open to those classified as Coloured, based on the assertion that an African is any person with a least one forebear who was indigenous to the continent of Africa. This new language in the ANC was to

ensure that elements wishing to divide the ANC and broader liberation alliance were not successful in their mischief.

The SACPC noted in its communication with the ANC External Mission that – “While it is the policy of the SACPC to pursue the ideals of a non-racial democracy, this must not be confused as the rejection of the multi-racial and multinational character of South Africa. ‘Non-racial Democracy’ in our view, is essentially that the State will be organised politically and economically on non-racial lines, but that the various character and identities of the national groups do not automatically disappear and will still have to be considered after a ‘Non-racial’ Democracy has been achieved. The Coloured convention certainly was against any special status for the community.”

They continued, ‘In any case this is a matter which is recognised as debateable, and has never been decided one way or the other in the SACPC.’”

After the contents of the internal SACPC report had been made known broadly to the exile community and the Anti-Apartheid Movement, Desai and Marney could see that they were unable to play the SACPC card any longer. In the memo released by the SACPC, the executive exposed the pair and said that it would have no alternative but to announce their suspension if they did not desist in their actions and misrepresentation.

This set the tone for those who considered themselves to have the tri-continental heritage of local African indigenes, African-Asian Slave ancestry, and a degree of non-conformist European ancestry, to have continuous and robust discourse within the ANC over the years.

From the early years of the 21st century two mutually complimentary streams would emerge as to how to move away from the term Coloured in going formed. Some who had strong roots in the San, Nama, Korana, Griqua

and Cape Khoe communities established that they rejected the Coloured label and re-embraced their traditional indigenous names as Africans.

Some in the other stream also rejected the term Coloured and asserted a preference for being recognised as Camissa Africans acknowledging their multi-ethnic tri-continental character rooted in local African societies, as well as their descentance from African-Asian enslaved peoples, with some non-conformist Europeans assimilating into their communities. This has gone a long way to addressing what Reg September called the need to separate the fact that “we are” from what others said “we should be called” and moved in the direction of self-identification as opposed to labelling.

That others may still wish to self-identify according to how the colonial and Apartheid regimes labelled them as Coloured, Reg argued was also their prerogative. But would agree that it is not the right of the state to categorise people as such. The state should not engage in any form of race classification and Apartheid practices regardless of whether it believed that this was important to transformation strategies. These were practices that were labelled ‘Crimes Against Humanity’ in international law.

The approach in the 21st century that has been emerging from communities classified as Coloured has offered a long-term solution that is in keeping with the fact that just as national groups such as Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, Pedi existed as traditional African societies so too there were distinct national groups of people with old Cape San and Khoe heritage who are Africans as well as others with an African ancestral-cultural heritage that involves tri-continental roots.

During 1965 the SACPC concluded its consultations and was able to release a clarifying statement in the new year, 1966. Through its General Secretary, Reg September. It said: “We wish to affirm our belief that our political programme, embodied in the Freedom Charter, provides the basis

for a democratic South Africa and we pledge to do all in our power to work for its implementation and success. In confirming this, we place on record our solidarity with our sister organisations in the Congress Movement, and particularly with the African National Congress at home and overseas.”

It went on to say – “The ANC we recognise as the spearhead of the liberation movement in South Africa, and we have no hesitation in acknowledging it as the mouthpiece of all sections of the oppressed people in its activities overseas. At the same time, we call on all members in exile to give the ANC their fullest support in the task of propagating our policy and struggle here at home, while these members represent the SACPC outside. In doing so, we recognise the EXTERNAL MISSION OF THE ANC, as representatives of the aspirations of the SACPC and while pledging our fullest co-operation as an organisation we see no reason for an independent SACPC External Mission.”

They then went further in the statement elaborate – “We note with concern the activities of certain members, namely B Desai and C Marney, as described in the documents placed before us. We note in particular:

1. Their refusal to accept the ANC as the spokesman of the SA Liberatory movement and their refusal to subject what we view to be their personal opinions to the unity of our movement.
2. Their association with the Pan-Africanist Congress at the expense of unity with other Congress organisations.
3. Their apparent reluctance to accept co-operation of our General Secretary, who as far as we are concerned is carrying out the policy of this CPC.
4. The danger of disruption and disunity which lies in their views in connection with the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain; views which we consider to be inconsistent with the policy of the CPC.

5. Their proposals initiating a ‘unifying movement’ other than that which already exists under the leadership of the ANC.

We repudiate the statement made by Mr Marney in June, namely that the SACPC is no longer affiliated to the Congress Movement. We therefore call upon Mr Desai and Mr Marney to desist from the line which they are at present following and demand that they should act in the spirit of this resolution. Should they fail to do so we shall have no alternative than to announce their suspension from the positions which they presently hold in the SACPC.” (Notably Desai’s position was a co-opted member of the executive specifically brought in to assist the ailing former SACPC President James la Guma. When la Guma passed away, Desai continued as a co-optee by executive agreement to act in that position until elections could be held for the position of President by a general meeting of the membership. Desai was effectively not the elected President of the SACPC, and Marney whom Desai appointed to replace Reg September as General Secretary when Reg was on the run to escape South Africa, was an ordinary member.

The response of Desai and Marney in March 1966 was to announce that they had dissolved the South African Coloured People’s Congress. The fact that the SACPC had already effectively formally merged into the ANC as formally announced two months earlier was ignored. The rogue duo released a lengthy statement as though they were the genuine SACPC and gave what Reg believed to be their own rather distorted historical overview.

In it, they falsely reported that a schism between the SACPC and ANC had been developing from as early as 1962. They accused the ANC leadership of treachery and made the following five points, announcing that they:

1. Declare that the SACPC is dissolved.
2. Recognise the revolutionary character of the PAC and announce our acceptance of their comradely invitation to join the PAC as Africans and equals, dedicating ourselves to building up one nation and wage a single struggle against the common enemy of white supremacy and its foreign backers who have made our country their looting ground.
3. Call on South African Coloureds and Indians numbering two and a half million enslaved people to follow our example by becoming members of the dynamic Pan Africanist Congress, and for all time bury their racial tags.
4. Brand those who would continue sectional and racialist activity as enemies and traitors to the cause of our liberation; and
5. Affirm our determination to uphold the noble ideal of a non-racial socialist democracy in our beloved country.

Reg saw this as just a crude, fraudulent and destructive counter-revolutionary stunt aimed at undermining the ANC and discrediting the Anti-Apartheid Movement. It resonated exactly with what the Apartheid regime had been seeking to do ever since the external mission of the ANC had been established. In taking this unconstitutional action, Desai and Marney had acted in a provocative manner and suspended themselves from the SACPC. They also marginalised themselves from any meaningful opposition to Apartheid on the International Front.

Events within the Congress Alliance over-shadowed what Reg saw as a dishonest and delinquent action on the part of Desai and Marney. Everyone in the know of SACPC affairs simply saw this move on their part as ludicrous and ignored them. Reg and the SACPC continued on what he saw as the

realistic course now set by the ANC in consultation with the SACPC, which took the struggle forward in a coordinated manner.

The SACPC, COD, and SAIC structures could not be maintained in South Africa under the new conditions and naturally faded away. Starting in 1967 and over time, ever new formations arose in South Africa as the conditions of the struggle changed. By the 1980s the trade union movement, the Mass Democratic Movement of Organised Civil Societies and the United Democratic Front had all emerged as a result of the coordinated efforts of those who worked under the common umbrella of the ANC. The issue of the image of the liberation movement, which had caused so much schism in the 1960s, was lost in the sands of time, and by 1985 those issues of membership and leadership on a non-racial basis had been dealt with and the ANC embraced change.

The two SACPC comrades that Barney Desai deserted when they were sent to Eastern Europe for military training, went on to serve as soldiers and were sent on operations into the then Rhodesia and South Africa. As mentioned, Basil February was killed in action in the Wankie Campaign in 1967. James April was deployed into South Africa in 1970 and was captured and tried in 1971, receiving a 15-year sentence, which he served in the Robben Island political prison. He was released in 1986 and immediately faced many restrictions.

By that time many young Coloured men and women had entered the ranks of Umkhonto we Sizwe in the struggle for freedom. Regardless of all its flaws the SACPC, and the guidance of Reg September as its General Secretary, had crafted a path that successfully led to new generations within the Coloured community accepting the challenge of embracing their fellow Africans and contributing meaningfully to the liberation struggle. As Reg would say, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”.

Those at the 1969 Morogoro Conference opposed to anyone from the “minorities” becoming members of the ANC were led by Robert Resha and Tennyson Makiwane. This grouping was expelled with others as the “Group of Eight” in 1975 because they established a separate organisation – the ANC-AN and campaigned against the ANC.

These ructions in the liberation arena were at their height during Reg September’s years as the Chief Representative of the ANC in London. For a man who had endured so much in the struggle and for so long it was really very stressful to continuously have to face insult simply because he was an African of multi-continental cultural heritage, known as Coloured.

It was lost on his critics that Walter Sisulu, Joe Matthews, Winnie Mandela and so many other Africans were never questioned about their ‘mixed’ or Coloured roots. This schismatic and frankly discrimination approach to Coloured comrades festered on for a long time and contradicted so much of what the ANC and the broad liberation movement stood for. To Reg September’s credit, he developed a thick skin and showed his discipline by not getting side-tracked from the main focus of dislodging the Apartheid Regime.

Those from “minority” groups would not be allowed in the National Executive of the ANC for another 16 years, until the Kabwe Conference of 1985, which agreed to allow all South Africans regardless of “race”, inside or outside of South Africa, to be members and to be office bearers up to executive level with all rights and privileges.

This was the original position that had been argued by Reg September and the SACPC since the early 1960s. They had initially compromised even though they argued that at least all South Africans categorised as “non-White” should have full membership rights in the ANC, but that had not

been accepted largely because of attempts to avoid a serious split with the narrow ethno-nationalists.

Nonetheless the narrow ethno-nationalists still claiming that only those considered to be of pure sub-Saharan African lineage as defined by colonial and Apartheid administrations, continued murmuring dissent post Kabwe, and continued to practise their exclusivist approach within the ANC. Because the ANC was a broad-church organisation, these views and practices remained, and later would gain traction and hegemony within the ANC as Bantustan elements came back into the post-1990 ANC, and ethno-nationalism flourished under Jacob Zuma in the 21st century.

Prior to the Morogoro Conference in February 1965, the ANC had already established missions in London (for the UK and Europe), Dar es Salaam, Lusaka, Cairo, and Algiers. Chief Representatives, who were answerable to the National Executive, were appointed and deployed. Within the London Mission in particular, mechanisms were developed to move towards the integration of all South Africans, without necessarily opening up the ANC. Consequently, extended National Executive meetings involving Coloured, White, and Indian leaders were possible. These were the first steps towards the 1969 Morogoro decisions.

While this transitional stage was evolving, another type of Alliance was slowly coming into being, namely that the ANC, SACTU and SACP together with MK, were jointly being referred to as the National Liberation Movement, very much as originally promoted by the National Liberation League founded in Cape Town in 1935.

Reg and Hettie September had been through a very rough passage into exile. In the process, through the discipline and clear thinking that he displayed to leaders in the ANC and particularly to O R Tambo, Reg was

shown due recognition as an exceptional national leader and given more and more responsibilities.

His deployment to the UK was an ANC decision even though he was not a member of the ANC then, but only a leading cadre of MK and the SACP. Oliver Reginald Tambo was an astute leader who believed that it was vital and strategic to ensure the unity and cohesion of the South Africans in exile in London across the racial divide.

Tambo believed that Reg September had the political grounding, temperament, discipline, and charm to ensure that a strong foundation was built in this mission so that the ANC would have a dependable logistical and political rear-base. He also took note of Reg September's pioneering efforts back in 1952 to build an international solidarity base. It is unfortunate that by the 21st century the new ANC had marginalised the memory of Reg September's contribution, simply because in the 1990s he humbly stepped aside to give new generations a chance to lead.

From his arrival in London, Reg had very specific duties given to him by the African National Congress and his focus was unifying and building cohesion. He actively strengthened the ANC support among "Coloured" people through one-on-one education and engagement in building the underground. It was in this context that Reg would continue to keep in touch with the SACPC members and leaders back in South Africa. He did however understand that if this organisation was to continue to be riven by disunity and contradictions, it should rather be allowed to dissolve naturally.

The ANC had appointed Mazisi Raymond Kunene as the ANC Chief Representative and established an ANC office in Rathbone Place. It was from here that Reg September as deputy to Kunene continued to carry out his mandate from the SACPC inside South Africa and the one from ANC

Acting President OR Tambo, representing the formal external mission of the ANC.

After the Morogoro Conference however, in 1969, Reg September was then appointed as Chief Representative of the ANC in London for Western Europe to succeed Mazisi Kunene. He served as Chief Representative until 1978, and was succeeded first by Cap Zungu, then by Ruth Mompoti and Solly Smith, and finally by Mendi Msimang. Reg was the longest serving Chief Representative of an ANC foreign mission. In 1978 he left the UK to go and work at the ANC headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia. After 1985 he served on the National Executive of the African National Congress.

It is important to note that by this time Reg September had a deep relationship with Tambo, President of the ANC. Here is Reg September's account of the relationship he enjoyed with the man we of the younger generation later saw as Papa - the other Reginald.

Reg elaborated on their special relationship - *We shared the name Reginald. I addressed the President as O R or as Chief, with deep affection and respect. This is the manner in which we all addressed him.*

I first became acquainted with him in 1956 when we all met at the Treason Trial. The Western Cape had hardly ever played hosts to Africans of that stature. Those who governed saw fit to declare the Western Cape a Coloured preferential area. In the Coloured communities many were duped into believing they were in fact superior to those of darker skin. It was an extremely difficult time.

Before the days when people of colour walked urban areas with confidence, young black men who graduated in the Eastern Cape set their sights on Johannesburg. After all, that was the Industrial hub, the mining centre, the centre of African resistance. Among those who had aspirations to be part of that great hub were young patriots of the calibre of Mandela, Tambo, Sisulu, and Nokwe to name but a few. There were those of us who did not come from the Eastern Cape

who had to wait until the Treason Trial to experience the privilege of meeting these men who were to play such an important role in shaping the future of our country.

It was during the Treason Trial that we had the honour and pleasure of being invited to O. R. and Adelaide's wedding. It was such a treat to see them dance, to be part of such an enjoyable yet solemn occasion. I was about 33 years old at the time and at times felt quite overawed at the whole scene. The wedding, the trial, the meetings, the company was wonderful. There was such warmth, such comradeship.

In the fort itself, where we were imprisoned, we once heard a group of prisoners singing in an adjoining cell. It was beautiful to hear them sing 'Ten to Ten'. It was the story of a mother, a girlfriend, seeing off a young man on a train journey to the mines. Meanwhile O. R. had pulled together a choir of some of our own cell mates. On hearing the neighbours sing, he organised a joint session; only God knows how he managed it. The professionalism with which O R got the choirs together was truly admirable.

I next saw O R when I reached Dar es Salaam after my way out of South Africa, escaping from the Police. He was in charge of the external mission, which faced the horrendous task of arranging the reception of cadres who had come out from South Africa for military training; organising camps in different countries prepared to offer training, organising food, clothes and shelter and the return to South Africa of those trained.

In addition, our external mission faced the huge challenge of building international solidarity, which had to be developed. The UN had to receive constant attention to keep our struggle's profile alive, as well as developing friendly relations with states, organisations, and individuals. All of this had to take place under O R Tambo's leadership. He had to gather the most suitable comrades he could muster. It was mind boggling.

While in Dar es Salaam, where I was for about eighteen months, I regularly saw O. R. when he was around. Of course, he was constantly dashing around the world. At times we lived in the same building. When he usually left every morning before anybody else, I understood that he usually went to a place of worship. As he entered the office, he would make a practice of greeting each and every one by name, taking special interest in any newcomer. He was so respectful and so careful in his relationship with people.

Over a period of time, I came across him at one base or another. On these occasions, the women in charge of food appeared to be competing over looking after O R. I can remember how they made sure that the best paw paws or mangoes were set aside for him with such pride. It was the same when he visited a camp occupied by MK. You would see the young cadres taking special care in preparing a special bush-toilet for O R. They had such a high regard for the man. He was such a caring comrade too. On one occasion I had to join his group on a visit to Zanzibar, and I did not have a jacket. He of course offered me one of his own. If I remember correctly, it was a bit too big, but I wore it anyway.

During my time as Chief Representative in Western Europe I had the honour to accompany him on trips to the USSR, Korea, India, and China and at first hand witnessed the exceptional care he took in preparing his speeches and statements. In India I sat in on a group preparing his speech with him. He was ever so meticulous in his choice of words. In fact, it proved too much for me, and after a while I retired hurt with exhaustion. How he coped with his bruising schedules I shall never know. He kept it up for 30 years!

Meanwhile world leaders all clamoured for him to visit them. He had to manage. I then understood why his health suffered. His feet became swollen as a result of his frequent travels and once when I was about to try to remove his shoes, he would not allow it since it would be too difficult to put them on again. It was understandable just how worried Adelaide must have been. His asthmatic attacks

were painful to witness. It was he who often said that we had to cultivate a culture of service and sacrifice. He meant every word and lived it.

His driver, Mgomane, who looked after him over a long period, also took so much care of him. If I say that people all had such a deep respect for him, which bordered on hero worship, I don't think I would be far wrong. I too loved him dearly.

At meetings, he gave everyone the opportunity to present their point of view and then he would summarise a consensus at the end. I would describe him as the ultimate consensus man. This characteristic defined him. 'Beware of the wedge-driver' he would often say. And of course, we were all in contact with people of different points of view.

Once I remember having been asked to transfer an idea for an attack which would have meant the loss of civilian life. He took the trouble to give a very detailed answer. He was totally committed against the loss of civilian life. In a private chat he always tried to articulate respect for each other. He would make certain that nobody ever spoke in a language that was not understood by all participants in a discussion. He was very strict about this.

After a long night meeting in Morogoro, he took me for a walk. It was a beautiful evening. He conveyed a message which he had received from Nelson Mandela who wanted to be certain that we all understood the difficulties that Winnie was facing and that she needed the support of all of us.

He ventured into a couple of personal experiences as he held my hand in a fatherly way, or that of an elder brother. It was then that he joked and told me of an experience he had as a young man. His Chief had insisted that O R should share a drink of liquor with him; something O R never quite understood. On trying to mount his horse, O R fell off. He had learnt his lesson the hard way. It's an experience that must have stood him in good stead for many years. I never knew O R to drink liquor.

In the UK where I had the pleasure of seeing him from time to time, people in the solidarity movement all listened to him most attentively. Canon Collins and his wife played a key role in seeing him through those difficult years. We were all so grateful for the care which people of every level of standing politically and socially afforded him.

When he finally passed away, I felt humbly honoured to be among those who carried his coffin from his home.

In relating the story of his relationship with Oliver Reginald Tambo, Reg reveals much about his own caring character. These two men named Reginald made a huge difference in the lives of so many and left a legacy for generations to come. They both certainly had an indelible effect on my life too.

10

London Chief Representative to ANC NEC in Zambia

A revolutionary concerns himself to the cause of a better life. In order to achieve this, he will sacrifice his own life. A revolutionary loves life and he knows that life does not end when he himself has died. He knows that life will go on in the hearts of a nation that will remember him. For this he will gladly give his own.

- Basil February – MK combatant who fell in the Wankie Campaign 1967

In 1969 the ANC reorganised itself globally as a result of the new strategies adopted at the Morogoro Conference and Reg September took over as Chief Representative in London for Western Europe. Reg was highly aware, appreciative of and inspired by the sacrifice made by Basil February, also from Cape Town, a member of the South African Coloured People's Congress, who died in combat in Zimbabwe during the Wankie guerrilla campaign of 1967. Basil represented the commitment of young Africans of African-Asian slave and Khoe ancestry who broke out of the Coloured straight-jacket of Apartheid division, to show African unity in action.

A letter from the Secretary General of the ANC outlined the mission after the Morogoro Conference and provided both the brief for Reg September and the communiqué to the ANC membership:

“The recent Consultative Conference of our organisation adopted very important and far-reaching decisions whose implementation will ensure effective mobilisation of the maximum potential of all of the revolutionary forces of our movement. To this end, it will be necessary that proper organisational units which will be activated to carry out the essential revolutionary tasks of our External Mission, should be set up.

It is therefore suggested that immediate steps should be taken to set up a branch of the ANC External Mission in your area. For efficient and smooth functioning, the Branch Executive Committee should be composed of seven members who will be elected at a properly constituted meeting of not less than 20 members.

The immediate and foremost tasks of the Branch Executive Committee are:

1. The execution of the political and organisational tasks which will be detailed out from time to time by Headquarters through the External Offices where these exist.
2. Submissions of regular monthly reports on branch activities to Headquarters. These reports should be submitted through the local office of the External Mission under whose direction the branch will function. Where no office exists, contact may be maintained directly with the Secretariat at Headquarters.
3. Mobilisation and activation of the Youth and Women’s Sections in the areas under the jurisdiction of the particular branch. It is suggested that where possible, small committees of at least three but not more than five should be set from amongst members of the various sections This committee can either be elected by members of the respective sections or appoint a branch committee.

Kindly give us a progress report as soon as possible.

Amandla! Maatla!

Alfred Nzo
Secretary-General

The job of a Chief Representative, and most especially in the strategic London Office, that time also incorporating Western Europe, had many facets.

Firstly, Reg was tasked with confirmation and organisation of membership. Thus far the membership had only been open to those that the Apartheid regime referred to as Natives, so those activists in London who were barred from returning to South Africa and were classified as Coloured, White, and Indian were now eligible for membership under the post-Morogoro policy of the ANC.

It was relatively easy to integrate SACP, MK and SACTU members who had always worked closely with the ANC. What was more difficult was dealing with many from other backgrounds who may also have been forced to leave South Africa as a result of their activism, as well as those who simply of their own free will left because they were not happy with what was happening in the country. The ANC was an organisation which was at war and thus it had to be very careful of infiltration. Reg and those assisting him had to manage this transition.

Part of managing this transition was ensuring that the ANC culture and cohesion was maintained and that members adhered to the security requirements and discipline needed of a liberation movement. Of the utmost

importance was maintaining the African character of the movement because in Europe and other countries outside of the continent it was easy for a drift to occur, cloning the ANC into just another European-style civil rights movement.

Many of the more economically independent London activists were frequently visited by family, friends, and acquaintances from South Africa. This offered many opportunities for building the organisation at home, but it also posed threats, not least of all through the issue of loose talk. Furthermore, highly trained Apartheid agents who could quickly chameleon into the ANC also were sent abroad to infiltrate the ANC.

Part of the expansion of membership involved setting up branches and giving tasks to them and to individuals. Their work had to be coordinated. As the UK membership grew, everything from conflict resolution and the welfare of comrades came under the Chief Representative and what was called the Regional Political Committee (RPC). Reg was really the first to have to deal with this complex level of organisational development and oversight. Strategically success or failure of the London/Europe ANC Mission could make or break the ANC in terms of one of its four strategic objectives defining the nature of the struggle.

The Chief Representative also had to manage relations with the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), other Southern African liberation movements with representatives in London, the trade union movement in the UK, the academic community, the churches, the International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF), the Mozambique and Angola Information Centre (MAGIC) and a host of other organisations. The Chief Representative was also there in case the British government or any other civil or corporate body wished to communicate with the ANC.

The ANC also developed a global political strategy to raise support for the struggle and to develop and intensify an international strategy to isolate the Apartheid Regime politically, on the social-cultural-sport exchange front and economically, as well as through enforcing an arms boycott. Furthermore, there was the task of raising material aid and finance to support the growing numbers in MK camps and the frontline states.

Reg grasped the tasks diligently and effectively crafted the ANC external mission in London accordingly, but it resulted in continuous personal attacks from the far-left and the African-nationalist right of the political spectrum.

All of Reg's skills, honed over the past 30 years from when he was a young trade unionist and activist, were now able to be used in a strategic leadership role. At that stage Reg's reach included much of Europe too, because it took time and resources to establish the many ANC missions in key cities of Europe. By the 1980s the ANC had Chief Representatives in all Europe's major centres.

While this period of Reg's life should have been the highlight of his many years of struggle, Reg would later say that they were the worst years of his life. In fact, his life was made a living hell as a result of the backlash of the narrow-nationalist revolt within the ANC, who deplored the fact that O R Tambo had appointed a Coloured person as Chief Representative of the ANC in the strategically important office in London.

Just as the real reason behind Desai's opportunism, cloaked in political language, was the need to control the political office in London, and thereby the resource and support base that went with it, so control was also the goal of the "Gang of Eight" of the African National Congress – African Nationalist (ANC-AN) – who did all in their power to obstruct Reg and his mandated work.

Reg had never experienced such abuse from comrades at home, in the form of narrow ethnic anti-Coloured antagonism and constant insult. The narrow ethno-nationalists kept up a constant barrage of attacks in private and in public and did everything to ridicule other Coloured, Indian, and white comrades. Everything to them was a “communist plot”, as they linked communism with what they called minority group overlords. At times the language that these narrow-nationalists used was little different to that of the Apartheid regime. As a result, Reg’s health deteriorated, and he developed ulcers with other complications.

Reg had this to say: *They wanted to control London if they could because it was a very important centre for everybody. As far as they were concerned, if they could unseat this pale-face Coloured then it would make things easier for them. They caused us endless problems, endless problems. And eventually of course they lost their positions in the organisation, as you know. It was a very, very difficult period in my life – in fact, one of the most difficult periods of my life, politically. It made me quite ill, and I think it also contributed, even I would say, to the stroke which comrade M B Yengwa suffered. When I eventually left London, first to get medical treatment in GDR and the Soviet Union, and then to undergo military and secret work training, before going on to take up a new position in Lusaka, I was very, very relieved to leave London, and my health improved.*

Reg was blamed by the narrow-nationalists for having “captured” the mind of O R Tambo. It was a ludicrous charge. What Reg September had done was to play his important role as one of a number of voices, not least of all that of Tambo, in curbing the narrow fundamentalist politics of ethno-nationalism. Reg always deferred to Tambo and the two men loved and respected each other as brothers. For Reg, O R Tambo was his leader in all things political. It is not lightly that from all that I have learnt in person over the years and from the research into this book, that I say that Reg as one of

the closest companions of OR Tambo, should be seen in the same light of esteem as that shown to Mandela and Tambo.

Reg accomplished much over a decade that resulted in putting the ANC on a firm footing in the 1970s; something that few give him credit for. He did this at great personal risk. He faced the full onslaught of the Apartheid regime, the toxicity of the combination of radical-left and Desai's undermining tactics and not least of all the wrath of the ANC-AN.

By the mid-1970s the ANC was beginning to see that with all of the new developments on the ground in South Africa, especially on the organised labour front and the national youth uprisings that it could not afford to allow the toxicity of the ANC-ANC faction to continue as it would both deflect from the unique new action inside South Africa and take this toxicity into the waves of people leaving South Africa and into the Black Consciousness arena. Reg called for the SACP to take decisive action and shut down this problem once and for all.

In 1976 the Central Committee of the SACP wrote an important analytical paper, "The enemy hidden under the same colour"¹⁹. The title took its cue from a speech by Mozambican President Samora Machel, who said: "The other face is that of the indirect and secondary enemy, who presents himself under the cover of a nationalist and even as a revolutionary thus making it difficult to identify him... the fighter must distinguish friend from foe even if the latter is concealed under the same colour, language, family ties or tribal markings as their own – even if he raises his flag with us."

The paper, no holds barred, hit out at the ANC-AN Gang of Eight manifestation in the ANC as "Ghetto-Nationalism" and saw this as an

¹⁹<https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/sections/sacp/1976/hidden-enemy.htm>

attempt by the Apartheid Regime and its allies to cultivate a Jonas Savimbi, Unita type opposition to the liberation movement. This gelled with the words of OR Tambo at the end of the 1969 Morogoro Conference.

In his closing address to conference, Tambo received a prolonged standing ovation when he exhorted the delegates present to:

“wage a relentless war against disrupters and defend the ANC against provocateurs and enemy agents. Defend the revolution against enemy propaganda, whatever form it takes. Be vigilant, comrades. The enemy is vigilant. Beware of the wedge-driver, the man who creeps from ear to ear, carrying a bag full of wedges, driving them in between you and the next man, between a group and another, a man who goes round creating splits and divisions. Beware of the wedge driver, comrades. Watch his poisonous tongue.”

The ANC-African Nationalist group responded with a vicious counterattack in a document called, “In Defence of the African Image and Heritage: Reply to the Central Committee of the SA Communist Party Statement Entitled – The Enemy Hidden Under the same Colour”²⁰ (February 1976). Reg September, as leader of the SACPC, was attacked for being subservient to white communists. They also indicated that there were many more in the ANC who shared their way of thinking.

The ANC executive were forced to take swift action and the leaders of the ANC-AN, known as the Gang of Eight, were expelled from the organisation. A similar pressure group on the radical left Marxist Workers Tendency who had embedded themselves in SACTU for a while, which had political roots linked back to the same trajectory of the WPSA and NEUM Movement, were also expelled from the ANC.

²⁰<https://www.sahistory.org.za/sites/default/files/archive-files3/boo19760200.026.021.000.pdf>

Reg as Chief Representative had his hands full putting out fires of dissention and division and political confusion and became more and more sickly. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they he was almost driven to his grave. But yet it was Reg that had been the quiet mainstay that ensured that the external mission of the ANC flourished whereas it could have floundered under the kind of pressure felt and the divisiveness directed by disaffected elements.

One can feel for Reg September when he said that the political climate and the post that he held at that time made him ill, and was the worst period in his life. Among Reg's personal papers are his medical records showing him going in and out of hospitals in the UK, in GDR and the Soviet Union. His medical case histories run into many pages and indicate just how much stress and pain he was in while trying to bring stability and balance both inside the ANC and with break-away elements of the ANC and the SACPC.

He was suffering from a severe ulcerative disease of the stomach, diaphragmatically chronic colitis, large intestinal diverticulosis, chronic cholecystitis, ischemic heart disease, atherosclerotic cardiosclerosis of the coronary heart arteries, atherosclerosis of aorta and brain vessels, di-circulatory encephalopathy, deformans spondylitis, thoracic osteochondrosis, a cyst on the left kidney and prostate adenoma. His suffering was severe as regards the stomach ulcers and he required hospitalisation and operations. Considering his medical records of that time it is actually a marvel that he enjoyed longevity. He certainly deserved the peace that he found in later life. At the time in question, despite the severity of his ill health, he steered the ANC ship through very rough waters.

Reg September was enormously thankful when his time as Chief Representative of the ANC came to an end, and he was deployed to Zambia.

He had been in the post just slightly short of a decade – the longest period held by any incumbent.

In 1978 Reg went to Zambia, where he was a member of the Revolutionary Political Council (RPC) and at times travelled down to the frontline states like Botswana. That is where I, the author of this work, first engaged with him in 1979.

In London Reg had divorced Hettie again and married Gwen Millar, a British woman. So, Reg and Gwen now moved home – lock, stock, and barrel – to Lusaka. First, they were housed at Makeni, next door to the complex of buildings that comprised the ANC Department of Information and Publicity (DIP). Later everyone including the Reg and Gwen had to suddenly evacuate the area in 1980 when there was news of an imminent attack by the SADF.

When I was redeployed from Botswana, my family and I had been given lodgings in the same complex right next to Reg and Gwen's home. At that time my name was Pat de Goede, so my family and I were known as the De Goedes.

I had first come to meet Reg September in Botswana at the end of 1979. I had been there since crossing the border into exile in 1978. When we left South Africa, the police came to question my mother, but she had no clue as to what was happening. In 1979 my mother came up to Botswana to see us so that I could explain the entire situation to her. Reg assisted in helping my mother to understand what exile meant and why her son and daughter-in-law and grandchild had to leave South Africa.

My mother was born six years before Reg just around the corner in Kent Road, the same Onderdorp, lower Wynberg, neighbourhood as Reg. Her connections to District Six and the factories in Woodstock gave them much to talk about. She had been in the garment industry and union, as well as in

the laundry industry and union. My father was a leatherworker in a shoemaking factory in Woodstock, just as Reg had been. So, Reg and my mother had much in common. She was however much less educated and lived in a very small world. Politics frightened her and she was scared for her son and grandchild. Reg was so warm and caring and gentle with her. He took her off for a walk and a long talk. When she came back, she said he was a very nice gentleman, and she understood a little bit better now.

Little did I know then that the following year I would be deployed to Lusaka and become Reg and Gwen's next-door neighbour.

I was deployed to establish and run a printing press for the liberation movement at the ANC Department of Publicity and Information (DIP) complex in Makeni at the end of 1979. While my main task was to establish and run a printing press, I also worked on the layout and design of publications and did some work for Radio Freedom. The DIP was part of the Office of President OR Tambo headed by Thabo Mbeki at that time and the radio and press sub-division was headed by Sizakele Sixgashe.

It was a difficult time in Lusaka, and we lived in war conditions. We were totally reliant on the ANC for everything. On arrival I was given some basic weapons training, issued with an AK LMG and defensive grenades, and took the MK oath. All of us were rostered for guard duty along with our other duties and this covered not only our home but Reg September's home as well. Reg and Gwen September were independent of the complex, but their home was just outside the fence, alongside our home, so it was part of the Makeni protection regimen where we all had turns at doing guard duty as rostered.

Reg and Gwen had met through the bilateral relations between the ANC and SACP, and the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) with their newspaper, the *Morning Star*. Gwen headed the fundraising and events drive

in her party and Reg had approached her for assistance with an ANC fundraising drive. They were married in 1975 and Gwen's focus shifted from the CPGB arena to that of the South African Liberation Movement. She also remained a strong link between the Eastern European embassies and friendship associations like the British Bulgarian Friendship Society.

Life in Lusaka was difficult for Gwen, very different from what she had imagined, and initially her skill sets were not used. Being cut off from her contact network could not have been easy, but she managed to get a job working as the administrative secretary of a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation project and she also worked in the ANC Treasury and for SACTU. This enabled them to have a bit more of a normal life under difficult circumstances.

Gwen was from the Cockney working class of London, having been born within the sound of Bow Bells. She left school aged 14 years and in 1939 became a junior secretary. Then she joined the CPGB at the age of 17, in 1942. In 1948 she married Derek Miller and had their son, Bevis. She continued with her political commitments until in 1952 she was elected to the Essex District Committee of the Communist Party. In 1955 she also was elected to the district committee of the London Cooperative Society. This led to her joining the British Peace Council and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. In 1961 Gwen became the National Fund and Events Coordinator for the CPGB newspaper, the *Morning Star*. In 1969 she was divorced from Derek Miller, and when her son Bevis went to university she moved back to London from Epping.

In Lusaka, our young family was helped enormously by Reg and Gwen September, Wolfie Kodesh, Kay Moonsamy, Captain Lerole, Uriah Mokeba, Benny and Sophie Williams de Bruyn, and Jack and Ray Simons. We needed to acclimatise to the environment, which at that time was

recovering from the end of the Rhodesian–Zimbabwe war incursions and an attack on the Liberation Centre. There were food shortages, destabilisation by the SADF-supported Mashula gang, and a breakdown of discipline among some ANC cadres. On top of that, there was an unprecedented infiltration of the ANC, which unleashed a period of dangerous and intense counter-actions to check the enemy infiltration.

While with Reg in Zambia he would bring me some batches of documents so that I would use my printers skills to forge these to be used by operatives at home. Minimum information was shared about users whose names and pseudonyms were not divulged in terms of need-to know –principles. My job was simply to produce an accurate forgery of the basic documents which would be populated with information by another in the chain. Many years later in post–Apartheid South Africa one of the tasks that I had in my job was the opposite – identifying forged documents.

Our son was just over four years old at this time, and every day he was taken to preschool by a vehicle which picked up each child from the different ANC residences and took them to school. Then in the late afternoon the children would be picked up and brought home. One day Max, who carried out this duty, failed to collect Dylan from the preschool, which was 10 kilometres away. Max would get forgetful. We had no transport of our own. Initially we thought that Max would have fetched Dylan but gone on to do something else and would bring the child home. Darkness fell and we were anxious as we knew that the preschool shut after five and everyone went home.

By 9pm there was full darkness, and we were beside ourselves with worry. I went around to Reg and Gwen and explained the situation. They were already in bed for the night, but Reg immediately got up, dressed, and told me to get in his car. We drove the long dark road to the city. When we

got to the school, we found the night watchman who had put Dylan to sleep in his little shack.

The man was so upset at how irresponsible the parents of this child were not to fetch him from school. He did not understand that we were freedom fighters (as the Zambians called us) who were reliant on ANC transportation. Reg was very caring and helpful. He knew that we had been having a difficult time for 18 months, moving about 15 times in Botswana, and then had a rough introduction to Zambia. I learnt a bit more about Reg the man, besides Reg the political leader, as his neighbour in Makeni. He was truly a remarkable man defined by a kind and giving spirit.

One day, word came from President O R Tambo that the security situation had worsened and that some of our centres and residences could be targets of an imminent attack. We were warned that we could no longer stay in Makeni and would need to move into town and be billeted wherever possible. I did not see too much of Reg in Zambia after that alert and the move away from Makeni. Just like the rest of us, Reg and Gwen also had to move to another part of town.

Over the years President O R Tambo had developed a particular style for the annual address to the nation on 8 January. He used this statement as a major mobilisation tool, and it was crafted to have something for every resistance front involved in the strategy and tactics of the ANC, as well as for every community, rural and urban. Reg and OR Tambo had always enjoyed a close relationship and Reg kept his finger on the pulse of political developments in the Coloured community and advised on the approach to be taken in that part of the statement that specifically spoke to the Coloured community. Effectively it was Reg September that wrote the section addressing Coloured communities. As somebody working within the

communications arena, which involved both internal and external liberation movement materials, I know just how much effort Reg put into this.

In Zambia Reg was happy to be away from the internal strife that dominated the UK scene and to be much more hands-on in guiding ANC tactical approaches to the growing upsurge of political activity inside South Africa. He was also given the task of coordinating political education in the movement. Reg was overjoyed at the new energy of the youth in Coloured communities and was happy that the ANC had overcome its inner organisational problems, which had been negatively impacting on mobilisation efforts.

After the Kabwe Conference in 1985, the ANC had no racial restrictions on membership and leadership and Reg felt a great sense of fulfilment. He had awaited the day that this question would be cleared up patiently and in a disciplined manner. Reg September had now become a full National Executive Committee member and later would become a key figure in coordinating the return to South Africa when the ANC and SACP were unbanned.

Now that he was away from London, Reg was able to get a better idea of how much he had actually accomplished when he was Chief Representative of the ANC in London. He came to see that the ANC that he helped to build was now a fairly powerful organisation globally that had the respect of the international community for its levels of professionalism and maturity in the political arena. No other political organisation in the South African arena had developed such a coherent and respected approach.

In response to the Apartheid regime's "Total Strategy" and "Stratcom", the ANC had developed its four-pillar strategy and tactics. It had moved a long way from having a single approach and had adopted an integrated strategy with components of armed actions, high-level underground

organisation, open mass-based civil and trade union activities, and a focused international isolation campaign with economic, cultural, sporting, and political components.

Reg felt that the pace in Zambia was slower, and it took quite a bit of adjustment. He came to appreciate what he called a ‘relaxed’ environment. He said it taught him patience. It also gave him a new perspective on what had actually been achieved over the 20 difficult years of the 1960s and 1970s. Holding a line in all those battles to establish a united and coherent organisational structure and the battles against detractors, provocateurs and political adventurers and opportunists had paid off. Within that hurly burly of arguments and counterarguments, which developed a life of their own and in which it was difficult to see the wood for the trees, it was difficult for Reg to be able to step aside and know where his own principles and vision stood in relation to the tactics embraced to defend the ANC.

In Zambia Reg was able to look at his own special contributions that could enhance the work of the liberation movement and not simply be in defence mode. It also afforded him the opportunity to learn from new formations and their tactics at home. His time in Zambia helped him appreciate that the compromises that he had had to make for the sake of unity back in the 1960s actually laid the ground for a great leap forward for new generations of talented young Coloured activist leaders. They were coming to the fore like never before in the last 50 years to embrace their other African brothers and sisters in a deeper, respectful manner, which had not been seen for a long time. Reg also witnessed how the ANC itself began to embrace coloured activists and communities in a manner that had last been seen in the youthful days of John Gomas and James la Guma.

But the “African Image” debate of the 1960s got a new lease on life and followed Reg September to Lusaka. Again, it developed into a heated affair

and debates raged in meetings across Lusaka and at times became destructive again. It unsettled the peace, but the more dynamic relationship with those inside South Africa now participating in debate changed the dynamic, and by the time of the Kabwe Conference in 1985 the issue was settled, allowing all to be members and office-bearers.

However, the ANC did not do enough to educate its members about what ultimately helped to swing the debate, namely the revisiting by Jack Simons of the 1919 and 1923 Conferences of the ANC. In it, the definition of “African” included Coloured people as evidenced by the membership of James la Guma and John Gomas, who were also office-bearers at that time. Jack produced irrefutable evidence that those classified as Coloured had indeed been both members and leaders of the ANC which accepted Coloured people as Africans. The marginalisation of Africans classified as Coloured only began in the late-1940s coinciding with the imposition of strict Apartheid ‘race-silos’ of classification and the many Apartheid laws that went with its imposition.

The historic scenario of how the name of the South African Native National Congress was changed to African National Congress and the international definition of “African” was accepted, had been lost in discourse over-40 years. People began to ask what else was being lost in the rigidity of some debaters. By institutionalising an approach to membership for all time based on the conditions prevalent in the 1950s or the 1970s, the ANC was not allowing new thinking at home to guide it.

Indeed, the assumption at home was that the ANC had been open to all regardless of race and colour, and the natural order of population demographics would ensure that those classified “Blacks” would make up the majority of membership and leadership without resort to Apartheid style social engineering. Many were shocked by the pre-Kabwe and post 1950

positions of the ANC, and that too brought about the change in approach. The phrase “Blacks in general and Africans in particular” continued to be used in blind acceptance that Coloured people were supposedly non-Africans. Colonial de-Africanisation of those classified Coloured in 1911 under the Union of South Africa became embraced and entrenched within the ANC and became a travesty of justice.

Within the ANC there was habitual talk of Coloureds as being part of the Non-African minorities. This unfortunately continued beyond the 1985 conference. The whole issue caused Reg much distress, but he feared the loss of liberation movement unity if the debate was too vigorously pursued in the 1960s to 1980s. He tended to think that it would ultimately all work out okay and the people at home would know the right way to proceed to give us an answer that would set our minds at rest post-liberation.

Whenever he heard people make an argument against the term Coloured, he heard a parallel under-current that denied the existence of his people, and he could never accept such a proposition. The two issues of terminology and the reality of the existence of a distinct sub-culture were separate, in his opinion. He particularly despised the use of the phrase “so-called Coloured” because he felt that it suggested that his community did not exist.

Unfortunately, at that time one could not simply wish terms away until there was a popularly accepted alternative to what one should call this African-Creole culture labelled Coloured. Reg argued that it was simply silly not to use the term understood by all, even if the term itself is not acceptable.

The contradiction was often raised with Reg when it was said, ‘but Coloured people are not Africans’, reminding Reg of the altercation that he had with one of the “Gang of Eight” guys, in front of O R Tambo. This fellow had blurted out ‘Reggie is not an African’. To which Reg responded, *‘What exactly am I then – French or Portuguese?’*

Reg was clear about being an African of creole roots but there was a dichotomy in the political culture of the ANC. One side of the mouth would say, ‘but Coloureds are Africans’ and the other side of the mouth talked of Coloured being a non-African minority in what had become contradictory ANC language of habit. Coloured people ended up having an ambiguous existence within the ANC. Which side of the mouth was right?

In the 1911 census, for the first time, almost half a million people were formally de-Africanised by erasing African identities like San, Khoe, Korana, Damara, Griqua, Masbiekers, Kroom, Enslaved Africans, Liberated Africans, British Africans, and others. The term Coloured was initially used differently for 60 years by the British Administration census returns for the Cape Colony to the British Parliament until 1904, to describe all non-Europeans including those sub-categorised with the derogatory term “Kaffers”.

The formal introduction of Coloured as a race category, a means of forced assimilation and an umbrella term for over 40 Cape African social groups took place in 1911. It was further developed in 1950 with the Population Registration Act and Group Areas Act. With all the factual knowledge about the origins of the term Reg understood why there was a discomfort with the term “Coloured”?

Reg would say: *‘You know... that’s true. We just don’t think through the whole issue regarding the term Coloured. It is time that we have to give this more thought; the thought that it deserves. My argument is that we cannot just have a knee jerk reaction that obliterates the real communities referenced by the term.*

Reg had always been keenly aware of his slave ancestry and his slave name, but after we came back to South Africa, he was much more open to wrestling with the issue of being an African of diverse ancestry and culture and having a cultural heritage rooted in local indigenous Africans, the

African-Asian enslaved and other non-European migrants, as well as some non-conformist Europeans who assimilated into communities of the former. All of this has contributed to an ancestral-cultural heritage, just as Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and others are sub-cultures of being African. All African sub-cultures in South Africa are modern cultures born of ethnically mixed older cultures going back for over 2500 years.

Nobody raises an eyebrow at the thought that German, French and Italian identities are European sub-cultures. Our problem has been that in South Africa we talk of colour and race and equate this with cultural heritage. There has to be a way in which the ancestral-cultural pride of being born of a people who rose above the adversity that included people surviving a range of “Crimes Against Humanity” – slavery, colonialism, cultural ethnocide, genocide, de-Africanisation, and Apartheid, can be proudly expressed as part of the full family of Africans in South Africa? We just need to think it through. This was a core part of Reg September’s passionate drive in the political arena.

As a result of such conversations Reg dearly wanted an institute for the study of Cape Slavery and Indigenous Peoples to be established in his lifetime, but alas it was not to be. He thought that the Castle in Cape Town would be the ideal home for such an institute and a museum on the “Peopling of South Africa” and the relating of the coloured or Camissa African creole story within that framework. This would finally be accomplished seven years after his passing with the creation of the Camissa Museum at the Castle. The emphasis on Camissa African identity also addressed a different way of expressing the ancestral-cultural identities that was labelled ‘Coloured’. This contribution to the debate and discourse was a practical tribute to Reg’s political legacy.

Both in London and in Lusaka Reg not only wore his SACPC and ANC hats. Reg also wore the invisible hat of the South African Communist Party. Reg September, the communist activist, never wavered in his support for socialism in the longer view. He was proudly working class and the class struggle was his most important focus. His opponents saw him as subservient to the SACP, but Reg was no follower – he was a leader and a leading communist.

It was in his party cell and among the party leadership that Reg could truly be himself and separate tactical thinking and actions from his more deeply held principles. In these roles he could constantly keep his total vision for Coloured people, for the working-class and other underclass people up-front.

The nature of the deeply clandestine behaviour required by communists and the sacrosanct adherence to the “need to know” principle has meant that Reg in all his notes and conversations left a great big wall of silence as part of his legacy. However, I can give a bit of perspective on how much the communist fold would have been a strength and mainstay for Reg, having also been a SACP member and also linked to the same communists in Lusaka whom Reg looked up to as mentors and as his contemporaries.

Reg September would never have lasted all those years tackling the difficult terrain in London, and in the new terrain of his Lusaka experience, if he had not had the party to turn to. The SACP was a place where non-racialism reigned supreme and where there truly was an environment conducive to testing ideas and engaging in analysis and indeed in producing new ideas. Within the structures of the party was a safe and trusted space where problems and challenges got an airing and where everyone aimed to find solutions. It was a place where the bar could be pushed, and frontiers could be breached.

The SACP structures and political life were intellectually stimulating and for a small clandestine party it excelled in having its finger on the pulse. The party had its own baggage and negative dynamics too, but this was far outweighed by its beneficial value compared to when one worked in a “broad church” arena like the ANC. The ANC was never a socialist organisation and was a lot more middle class in character than working class. Having a foothold in the SACP and the SACTU was extremely important for the constant rejuvenation that one required, working in the framework of what was basically a contested nationalist movement, with a mix of liberationist socialists and conservative narrow nationalists.

In Reg’s own words about Lusaka: *Lusaka was an interesting experience for me, working with the comrades there, getting to know the problems at headquarters level first-hand. Perhaps I have come out of Lusaka much richer, having had the opportunity to spend quite a bit of time with Jack Simons and I value that a great deal. We spent some good time together. I started first working doing administrative support work in headquarters with the Revolutionary Council but after the Kabwe Conference I became a member of the National Executive of the ANC after full integration beyond the previous restrictions on minorities.*

But of course, Lusaka was still exile. Exile has nothing to commend itself. Exile means that you are away from your base; you are not accountable to people on the ground as it were. The remarkable leadership of OR Tambo during that period will go down as one of the greatest achievements of the movement in exile. He was truly outstanding. The manner in which he kept people together, with his cool head, very wise leadership, and the respect in which all of us held him. He worked ceaselessly, and nobody could match him with the energy he put into it.

I left Zambia for the UK in 1981 and thus left Reg September behind in Zambia. We would work together again later in the UK after 1986 when I was working the ANC press and, still later back home.

In 1986 both Reg and Gwen returned to the UK . Reg continued to have to spend long periods abroad and away from home while Gwen worked for a charity serving children and youth from disadvantaged homes. Reg and Gwen split up in 1989, with Gwen continuing in her CPGB work and also working for the trades union UNISON. She retired in 1990 and passed away in 2008.

11

Perspectives – Reg through the eyes of others

At this point in this book on Reg September’s remarkable life it would have been negligent not to bring in some perspectives from others on the Reg that they knew. Perhaps this is even the most important part of this book. Leadership is something that cannot be self-proclaimed, as it is something that others recognise in a person. In the Political Estate today many office-bearers proclaim themselves leaders and demand respect. Being a leader and being an office-bearer, even a President, are two different qualities.

Respect is something that can only be freely given when leadership qualities are recognised by those around you. In our struggle for what we called People Power we had not in fact coined a new slogan. The old Greek term “*Demos Kratos*” from which the English word ‘Democracy’ is derived, means People Power. It was this phrase embraced as a political signature and watch-word by OR Tambo that underscored Reg September’s politics.

He not only believed in People Power, but as you will see in this chapter, he also embodied an empowered person who was absolutely focused throughout his life on empowering others individually.

Party Power in today’s South Africa has overwhelmed and depreciated *Demos Kratos – People Power*. The story of Reg September is all about the selfless and humble qualities of a gentle servant leader committed to People

Power underpinned by a belief in a political system that maximises public participation in legislatures and governance.

The best way to capture a picture of Reg September from the 1960s, through the 1970s and into the 1980s, is to look at him through the eyes of others that he worked with in different ways. This gaze will also capture some of the key issues of this time. It illustrates how Reg September walked his talk.

Here are the voices of the Rev. Michael Weeder, who talks about his first meeting with Reg September in London in the 1980s; Stephanie Kemp who experienced Reg in London from the mid-1960s; Michael Worsnip who had Reg as his ‘handler’ in the underground resistance of the 1980s; Gonda Perez who experienced Reg in Zambia and the UK; Ronnie Kasrils who knew Reg the longest and who interacted with Reg in many localities; Philip Balie who knew Reg in exile and worked in support of Reg as an MP during the first years of the democratic parliament; and Zelda Holtzman who met Reg in Lesotho and later in Zambia *en route* to training in Angola. Each will give some perspectives on the man, the leader, and his thinking.

Reverend Michael Weeder is the Dean of the Anglican Cathedral of St George the Martyr, Cape Town. He has been a priest in the Anglican Diocese of Cape Town for the past 27 years in many different rural and township parishes. His interest in identity and race resulted in his involvement as co-producer of the film *Lydia Williams: A Fervent Simplicity*, a documentary on slavery, which profiled the history of Lydia Williams, a formerly enslaved woman of Mozambican and Cape Creole descent whose life provides a rare glimpse into post-slavery consciousness.

Michael studied for the priesthood at St Paul's Seminary in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape from 1981 to 1984 and was ordained as a priest in 1985. In 1982 Michael had interrupted his formal studies to take up a scholarship that enabled him to visit Beirut in Lebanon and Nicaragua to study the role of religion in the context of conflict. Michael's baptism of fire as a servant priest in the urban environment started in Kensington, where he also ministered more broadly to cadres in the struggle and provided safe-house refuge to MK soldiers.

In 1987 Michael Weeder met with Reg September in London for the first time. This would not just be the start of a relationship between comrades – it was also the beginning of a deep friendship. After his return from exile, Reg and Michael developed a close friendship and Reg grew very fond of Michael.

In May 2011 Reverend Father Michael Weeder was installed as the 19th Dean of The Cathedral of St George the Martyr, Cape Town. Michael is also a writer and poet and starts his tribute to Reg off by quoting from another poet, whose words aptly celebrate Reg's life commitment to the struggle, which had effectively become the first love of his life. In many ways these reflections from people whose lives Reg touched, are love letters.

LONDON 1987. The duffle-coated couple in the far corner of the tea-room discussed various matters in a passive, competitive fashion. They had been there when I arrived twenty minutes early for my 11am meeting. The male of the two commented on the ferocity of the storm which had been a feature of life in most of southern Britain during the month of October. His companion waited long enough for him to order another pot of tea before setting forth on about the fire that had broken out a few days previous, on 18 November 1987, at Kings Cross.

The tea-room was in the North London Borough of Islington. I had met Jeremy Cronin a few days earlier in an equally dreary and ubiquitous location in the city centre.

Jeremy had spent seven years in the Pretoria Maximum Security prison. His wife, Anne Marie, had died of a brain tumour during this time. On his release in 1983 Jeremy resettled in Cape Town and not long afterwards published *INSIDE*, a collection of poetry that seemed to define his sense of life and how he chose to respond to his incarceration. This communist with the demeanour of a Jesuit priest had listened intently to my account of the political situation in the Western Cape and the events culminating in my leaving the country.

Jeremy concluded at the end of our meeting that I should meet Reg September. My response was mixed: I was keen to talk to Uncle or Oom Reg, as he was affectionately known, but felt that as a rank-and-file activist that there was not much more that I could add and that would merit such a meeting. Jeremy nonetheless went ahead and set up my first meeting with the legendary Reg September.

There at Kings Cross Uncle Reg stood before me: Of average height, slim and upright. A grey trench coat neatly folded over his left arm. Hand reached out to greet me – an unlikely looking revolutionary. The smiling, bespectacled person greeted me with a warm, ‘Hello, my brother’ and despatched my anxiety like African sunshine brightening up that gloomy, London day.

Uncle Reg guided our conversation through the personal and the political with humour. He spoke in a soft, smiling voice and with a precision of thought. I became aware that he knew a lot more about a given instance than what the question might have suggested. He put me at ease as he enquired after the health of this one or another.

I was being assessed by an old Creole soul, but I had questions of my own. It was about slavery, but I would not raise it at that meeting. I had been intrigued that many of the more prominent Coloured members of the ANC bore calendar surnames. Hence Dulcie September, Basil February, James April. It was a practice associated with Cape slavery and open to speculation: the slave-owners might have named slave children after the month in which they had been born. Or, it might have been allocated according to the month in which the enslaved might have been purchased or manumitted.

What was Reg's view on slavery and its place in South Africa's history, its effect on coloured self-awareness and identity? What consideration should an awareness of slavery play in the mobilisation of this community that always seemed ill at ease with its place in the commonwealth of South African communities?

I held back on these thoughts out of concern that I might be regarded as having an unhealthy preoccupation with Coloured ethnicity, marked by a provincial nationalism. I wished to explore these thoughts from an ANC point of reference as suggested by the movement's "National Question". However, I lacked the conceptual tools to present my points of view and felt I would flounder if engaged and possibly challenged. But I was to have many hours and days of meeting over time and did get to discuss all of these things in some depth as I found Reg to have a strong interest in these explorative questions too.

My knowledge of slavery, while having a desultorily awareness of it at school, really began in 1979 when I read Jack Simon's *South Africa, Race and Class*. Simons wrote that from 1709 on the movement of enslaved people was regulated by the *Pasbrief* when their masters sent them on errands.

By my reckoning not one or any organisation associated with the struggle against apartheid had linked a consciousness of slavery as part of a basis for

mobilising the Coloured community. I was wrong on that account but all that I had learnt and would experience for many years to come would only affirm my ignorance.

However, in the course of writing about Reg and talking to him, I learnt of the National Liberation League of South Africa (NLL). The league had been launched in December 1935 under the banner of ‘or Equality, Land and Freedom’. This organisation placed itself firmly on the path of the South African slave story, evident in its emblem of a slave who had broken free of his chains, holding a flaming torch aloft. It was the NLL, with its roots in consciousness of the anti-slavery campaigns that introduced the concept of ‘National Liberation’ and building ‘United Front’s’ to the African National Congress.

Reg, whilst in Matric at Trafalgar High in District Six, Cape Town, had joined the National Liberation League in 1939. His comment in a 2005 interview reveals the influences of those early associations on his life: *‘I have at times posed myself the question: “What caused an awakening of a section of the Coloured community to promote and participate in the development of such a significant number of political discussion groups in the Western Cape during my boyhood days?”’* He locates his answer in the *‘challenging experiences of the community, especially since the early 1900s.’*

In the Cape, the community formed what was the most populous of all racial groups in the City. Whilst most were abysmally poor, it also consisted of a skilled class mainly of slave origins, resulting in the development of a more “elite” sector with given expectations, economic, social, and political. During the period of the selling of people as slaves, our identity was erased, our names were erased, and our identity was trivialised. A people of unknown origin. That is where we will find the song “January, February, March...” sung flippantly.

During Uncle Reg's time as the ANC's London-based Chief Representative, a Nigerian diplomat, on learning of the arbitrary origins of the September surname, queried why he had not changed his name. Reg replied, *'I am in fact proud of it, because there is no slave mentality.'* It was no surprise that *"Coloured people feel marginalised since their origins do not matter to broader society, or are not supposed to matter. To deprive a person of pride is too costly. It is a bill which can never be met"*.

The next perspective came from Stephanie Kemp. Stephanie was originally from the rural Swartland district of the Western Cape and in the early 1960s was a student at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where she first got involved in political work as a result of her concern and developing consciousness arising from the Sharpeville Massacre.

In 1962 she was first arrested during a torch demonstration at UCT and imprisoned in the Caledon Square police cells. This led her to join the African Resistance Movement (ARM), an armed resistance group which was linked to the more radical wing of the Liberal Party.

In 1964 Stephanie was arrested along with other members of the ARM, detained at Kroonstad Prison, and charged with sabotage. In detention she was beaten and tortured before being taken to Pretoria Central Prison for trial. She was sentenced to five years in prison with three years suspended. The Minister of Justice was sued along with the security police for assault and the state settled out of court without admitting liability. Stephanie was released in 1965 after 18 months and in the following year she left South Africa for exile in London. Through her work in the Defence and Aid and Anti-Apartheid movements, Stephanie came into contact with ANC, SACP

and MK cadres and was recruited into the SACP. Stephanie, however, only became an ANC member after the Morogoro Conference allowed whites to be members in 1969. In London in 1966 she married Albie Sachs, whom she had met during her trial in South Africa. They had two children. Stephanie and Albie were divorced in 1980.

Stephanie was one of a small but highly determined and committed group of people who learnt the necessary skills and re-established the underground resistance inside South Africa, doing everything it took to do so. Stephanie Kemp returned from exile to South Africa in 1990.

Stephanie Kemp did not know Reg September before 1966, when she arrived in London, and says that she vaguely recalls meeting him at the wedding reception when she and Albie were married in September 1966.

Stephanie says: Leaders from the minority groups came together in London – Reg September, Joe Slovo, Yusuf Dadoo. A number of key ANC members were often deployed to London, so we moved about with the Tambos, Robert Resha, the Yengwas, Ngakanes, Dhlo mos and so on. We were a real diverse South African group. Mazisi Raymond Kunene was ANC Chief Rep based in the ANC office in Rathbone Place in London's Goodge Street area. But it tended to be an open office where we all met.

The SACP operated underground but Reg September was not in my SACP cell in London. MK had been founded in 1961 as an independent organization jointly by the SACP and ANC. The first High Command comprised 6 people – 3 each from SACP and ANC. Joe Slovo was the only one not imprisoned and was not a member of the ANC. Later MK high commanders were quickly arrested. Wilton Mkwayi for instance. There were many regional command comrades now in exile in London who were not ANC members – like MP Naicker, later Fred Carneson, and so on.

Because they were not ANC members, they could not be in Tanzania which gave hospitality to ANC and its members, and stipulated the conditions. There were members of MK who were not members of ANC which became an anomaly in command once MK simply fell under ANC control. In the 1967 Wankie Campaign, for instance, Basil February died, but he was not considered an ANC member. The Coloured comrades who considered that they were Africans and therefore different to white and Indians were not comfortable being called a non-African minority and lumped together with whites and Indians. This was never satisfactorily resolved.

I believe these different problems were an anomaly that contributed to the 1969 Morogoro ANC Conference decision to open membership to all South Africans in the External Mission only. People from minority groups, however, could not be in the NEC of the ANC for another 16 years until the Kabwe Conference of 1985.

After the Morogoro Conference, Reg September became the ANC Chief Representative in London and MP Naicker became editor of the ANC journal Sechaba. I remember Reg September as a diligent and most capable Chief Representative, always there and available, and reliable.

After 1969 Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo and Reg were deployed onto the Revolutionary Council. By the mid-1970s there was a great deal of movement of cadres between London and the Forward Areas.

Stephanie goes on to explain that after 1969, the ANC membership in London was augmented and organised first into Branches, then the Women's Section and the Youth and Students' Section. She says that this was how she got to know Hettie September as formidable and strong woman.

Stephanie says: I know the Septembers spent time in Dar es Salaam, but I can't remember when this was. I think at the beginning of their exile. Hettie

complained about the extreme and unrelenting heat in Dar es Salaam saying she walked around wrapped in the cotton sheet only.

Stephanie went on to explain her role and that of Reg September regarding the underground dimension of ANC, SACP and MK work. Not all exiles, regardless of their affiliation to these organs were involved in underground work and even between those working within this sphere, everything done was on a 'need-to-know basis'. Hence it becomes very difficult even now to write about everything. Not everyone knew what Reg September was doing – they knew perhaps what three to five people were fully involved in.

Stephanie says: I was doing underground MK/SACP work from late 1966. By 1969 I was deployed on to an organizational structure with Yusuf Dadoo as chair and including Joe Slovo, Reg September, Ronnie Kasrils, Aziz Pahad. I was aware that others like Jack Hodgson, Ronnie Press worked with this group too, although did not attend the weekly meetings of the cell. The role of this group was operationalization of tasks to mobilise and rekindle political work inside South Africa following the destruction after the Rivonia arrests. So, by this time I was working with Reg September on underground work.

We produced a range of propaganda that we distributed in various ways inside the country. We recruited non-South Africans like Alex Moumbaris who would take trips into the country and implement a range of tasks. We recruited South Africans like Ahmed Timol who could go back to SA legally, settle back into a semblance of 'normal' lives and then recruit others into SACP/MK structures initially and ANC structures after 1969, and our initial focus was to produce and distribute agitation propaganda.

Reg September was a pivotal figure in this work and specialised in working with people from the urban and rural areas of the South Western

Cape, Port Elizabeth, and Durban. These were all the areas in which Reg had been active in trade union and SACP work from the 1940s. Stephanie goes on to say: Later, I lived in the same street as Reg, in Anson Road Tufnell Park, when Reg was married to a Gwen. I remember Gwen, a British communist, as a rather loud and dominant personality, similar in some ways to Hettie but Hettie was a very strong woman steeled by struggle. I was that not surprised when Reg and Hettie again remarried each other when they returned to South Africa. There were levels of knowing one another that only South Africans can share. There were pieces of ourselves that we lost in exile and assumptions made about us by those who knew us only in exile. While we were neighbours in Anson Road, we had a break-in on the same day. It was a day-time break-in and clearly not a robbery. My papers were disturbed but nothing taken. The long arm of South Africa's security police and intelligence operations reached wherever we were based in the world.

Stephanie remembers Reg September as many others do, as a gentleman and a person with firm beliefs and dependable behaviour.

Reg was a quiet person, never saying anything out of place, taking his time to contribute in meetings. Gentle, with a sweet smile that was on his face often. He would engage in gentle teasing. He always called me "Boeremeisie". Though he told me he grew up in Wynberg, Cape Town and spoke more English as a child. Reg's affection was so obvious that I never took umbrage as I might have done with others who wanted to stress my Afrikaans background. He always had a twinkle in his eye and made me feel liked!

Ideologically Reg was clear, unwavering, and loyal. I never heard him criticize either leadership in our struggle, nor our allies. Reg never wavered in his commitment to the struggle and was humble, never demanding position and recognition, but willing to undertake whatever was asked of

him. I can't remember him arguing with others, but he was a stickler for policy and discipline.

At the 1969 Morogoro Conference – the ANC Consultative Conference held at Morogoro inland in Tanzania, protected by a horseshoe of mountains – leaders like Reg September attended as observers as they were not ANC members. I seem to remember that Reg was one of the comrades who was not comfortable when the ANC opened its doors in the External Mission membership to whites. The position of the ANC being the home for all Non-Europeans was held by quite a few comrades who accepted the logic of all of the black oppressed being members of the ANC, but not the inclusion of whites.

Reg September was not happy with the de-Africanisation of Coloured people as had gradually occurred in the ANC during the 1950s after the Apartheid regime came to power. His lifelong struggle was to build African consciousness within communities classified as Coloured after the deliberate policies of colonialism and Apartheid had imposed de-Africanisation. He had fought both conservative forces within those communities labelled Coloured and among those labelled Natives because they wished to entrench the separation of black people into separate blocks and impose their divide and rule approach and to assert control.

Reg believed that the ANC first had to address non-European or black unity before addressing the incorporation of whites into the ANC. The ANC had moved away from a time when John Gomas could hold office in the ANC. Just like Walter Sisulu's, Gomas's father was white and his mother an African, but he was registered as Coloured whereas Sisulu was registered as Native. Reg did not support whites becoming members of the ANC at that time, for strategic reasons rather than from a position of anti-white sentiment. It also entrenched the false notion the Coloureds were not

Africans. Dealing with those classified Coloured as a non-African minority along with whites sent out the wrong message throughout the liberation movement, and this would come back to haunt the ANC in future years.

Reg had already experienced the unnecessary antagonism from narrow Africanists towards Coloured and Indians simply because they were seen as a block, together with whites. The formation of a South African Coloured People's Congress was a tactical and practical action and was not born of thinking that wished to replicate the silos of the Apartheid system that had assaulted black unity. The APO on which it had been modelled had proudly carried the name "African" for almost a half century, and for 20 years before the ANC ditched the term "Native" in favour of "African". Reg's Coloured mentors were office-bearers in the ANC in the 1920s and 30s – James la Guma and John Gomas.

Stephanie recalls: There were others at Morogoro opposed to anyone from the minorities becoming members of the ANC and these included some members of the SACP. They eventually coalesced around Robert Resha and Tennyson Makiwane and this grouping were expelled as the "Gang of Eight" in 1975.

Stephanie remembers other cameos of captured time with Reg: I remember going with Reg to a funeral of a PLO leader in the newly built large mosque in Regent's Park. When we arrived there, we found that women could not attend the service in the mosque and so I was barred. Reg nevertheless attended and I was cross with him as I felt showing solidarity with women was more important.

But Dr Dadoo's funeral showed me that it is not always progressive to be rigid. There was a vehement discussion whether Yusuf Dadoo should have a Muslim funeral despite being a life-long communist. Eventually he had a

Muslim funeral and was buried across the path from Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery and a huge number of people attended.

Stephanie also remembers Reg as a man passionate about his own community and their cultural heritage, often referring to what people called the “Coloured Question” within the “National Question”. Stephanie says: When the issue of SA identity became controversial – especially Coloured identity – I seem to remember Reg was proud of his ancestral heritage and identified strongly with those the state called Coloured.

It seems to me that both among those with Khoe and San ancestry, as well as those with slave ancestry, there could be a much more profound expression of identity as indigenous African today than as labelled by Apartheid.

That is exactly what Reg September wanted his legacy to be. In conclusion, Stephanie Kemp says, I continued to see Reg when he and Melissa moved to Johannesburg. Reg was beginning to drift away with increasing dementia, but remained gentle and sweet. I have a photo of him with a very small dog (from next door) that he held very lovingly. At his 90th birthday too when he was surrounded by close friends and family, Reg was full of grace with none of the stridency and bitterness one can sometimes see as people begin to realize they have lost importance.

I was very distressed when he died, at the lack of appropriate recognition from the ANC and the SACP. Reg September had been an exceptional leader for decades, of similar stature to OR Tambo and Nelson Mandela since the 1930s, unwavering.

The memorial service in the Johannesburg City Hall was addressed by Thabo Mbeki. Other new faces from COSATU and SACP really didn't know Reg. And the service was poorly attended with people being bussed in who did not know who Reg was. I was so distressed that I felt I could not

attend the funeral service with provincial honours the next day and excused myself to Melissa. Reg September's memory just was not honoured in the highest manner that it should have been.

This demonstrated the ANC drift away from non-racialism towards narrow ethnic nationalism and a loss of its historic legacy. It also suggested discrimination and marginalisation of Coloured people and negated their role in the struggle. But the SACP too, have almost airbrushed Reg September from both it's and the ANC's history. There is no comprehension of the importance and stature of this Coloured leader. There is no biography of Reg September on the SACP website and no acknowledgement that he had been on the Central Committee during the period of banning or of the pivotal role of the NLL in its own development as a party. Indeed, the name of Reg September does not feature anywhere on their website. The Party has lost touch with its past. It is certainly not the SACP that we were once proud members.

Stephanie's final word was, "I don't think that anyone was in the struggle for recognition. But I did feel that someone like Reg should be recognized in a similar manner to the recognition of Tambo, Mandela, Walter, and Eleanor Sisulu in our history for his exceptional contributions, steadfast and very long service to the liberation of all South Africans and as a national leader. He was like the Nelson Mandela of Cape Town.

Now while Stephanie gave a perspective of Reg September as part of the team of revolutionaries building and coordinating the early underground resistance, it is also appropriate to hear one of the many voices of the

underground operatives for whom Reg September was a politico-military underground resistance “handler”.

There was a range of tasks that those involved in the coordination of clandestine struggle activity, ranging from the technical and logistical, to intricate communications like coding, decoding and later computer-based technology, right through to face to face briefing and debriefing by “handlers”. There were also trainers in underground work, military trainers, media production and dissemination trainers, bankers, and trainers for each of the ANC, SACP, MK and SACTU. There were even religious sector specialists, some of whom would also function as “handlers” or at least intermediaries. Reg had multiple skills and engaged in everything from writing and preparing pamphlets aimed at the Coloured community to be distributed through the underground structures to preparing new recruits for work in the underground resistance. Reg for instance engaged me in producing counterfeit documents for use by clandestine cadres in the underground.

One of those who had Reg as a “handler” was Michael Worsnip. Reg, though a communist, had always been interested in the liberation theology phenomenon and in the church’s role in the struggle. Michael would have been a captivating person for Reg who took great pleasure in interacting with those he interfaced with, operating back home. Reg was extremely careful and disciplined in keeping their confidence and keeping them safe.

Michael Worsnip, at the time of his involvement in conducting secret work as part of the underground resistance, was an Anglican theologian and priest. He had started his working life as a waiter in the Carlton Hotel in Johannesburg but went on to engage in university studies at Rhodes, Cambridge, and Manchester universities over the next seven years. He was avoiding military conscription, so after his studies he went to Lesotho to take

up a position lecturing at the University of Lesotho in Roma. This afforded him the perfect cover for also carrying out secret work. He also served as the General Secretary of the Lesotho Council of Churches. In 1986 he returned to South Africa to lecture at the Federal Theological Seminary in Imbali, Pietermaritzburg, and risked the full dangers of the Apartheid regime at its most sinister.

Over the course of his life Michael Worsnip has written a number of books, each of which reveals not only the subject of his writing but also many facets of himself and the motivation driving his involvement in the struggle. He is the author of various books, for instance, *Priest and Partisan: A South African Journey*, on anti-Apartheid activist and fellow Anglican priest, Father Michael Lapsley, who lost his eye and two hands in a 1990 letter bomb attack. He also wrote *Remittance Man*, a novel about a fellow by the name of Bertie King, a young South African who makes the terrible discovery that the rest of his family considers him to be too dark-skinned to continue living with them – shades of Michael’s own personal story with its Coloured dimension. Michael was also the author of *Between Two Fires – a historical account of the Anglican Church and the emergence of Social Conscience, in the period 1948 – 1957*.

After 1990 Michael moved on from the religious arena and into the arena of reconstruction of the post-Apartheid South Africa, working with land restitution and other secular realms of work.

Asked to give a glimpse of Reg September as his “handler”, Michael said: Well, let me firstly say that the reason Reg became my handler was because I just couldn’t work another day with the first “handler” into whose care I was originally delivered. I just found this fellow too frustrating for words. He was impossible to get hold of; entirely unreliable and completely vague. Otherwise, nice enough, but really, I couldn’t do it.

When one is putting one's life on the line back in a police-state an underground operative has to have confidence in the person who is literally his life line. Some holding important positions in the complex network of operational interface and command were people who had not had much real working life experience and were also much too flippant and arrogant; some drank too much and were loose-mouthed. In some cases, women operatives also complained about unacceptable sex-predator behaviour. Michael's critique of and lack of confidence in a particular adventurist and incompetent handler was not an isolated case.

Reg September was a careful and empathetic listener, who could be relied upon to give his utmost and to be a sober thinker. He too was critical of inappropriate behaviour and carelessness and had his own way of dealing with them. He was slow to get angry and was always careful about how he handled anything that he thought was wrong, but he could also justifiably get quite angry at times.

Michael goes on to say: So, Reg came my way as the result of my disenchantment with my previous handler. And really, it was a completely different story. We used to meet at one of the restaurants at Kings Cross Station. Hiding in plain sight as it were. The first couple of meetings were really about Reg just getting to know me and to talk very generally about things.

Then things got serious. He wanted me to write my 'biography'. What was I to put into it? Everything, he said. Everything I did and everyone I knew. I had to recount my friends; my enemies; my acquaintances. He said I needed to make it as detailed as humanly possible. The ANC was interested in everything about me. And they would be analysing everything and making connections.

So, I set about doing it. It took a very long time. If I remember correctly, I was working in Chessington at the time, having been kicked out of Lesotho by Major General Lekhanya.

After finishing my 'biography' I left a message at his home number setting a time and a date. And he was there at Kings Cross station to meet me. I brought it folded in a newspaper, which, after a while chatting about this and that, I handed to him. He said he was most impressed at my espionage skills, and we laughed about that.

One thing I remember about Reg was that he told me he only took cold showers. I asked why? He said he preferred that. I said I thought he must be a little crazy!

Together we worked out a means of communication between me and him because he wanted me to go back to South Africa – KZN (KwaZulu-Natal) in particular. So, I had to find a job, which I did, lecturing at Fedsem and we set up a mechanism for communication.

So, I recruited a friend that I had been a student with at Cambridge to be the go-between. All communication would be with him, and would be in code and he would then transmit the message to Reg; and of course, the other way. Much of my role was to get money into the country, just as it had been in Lesotho and around the country to operatives. I'm assuming it was for acquiring arms and munitions on the shadow-economy market, and support for underground structures and for the work of mass-based civil society campaigns.

Most of the time my engagement would be with Beyers Naude, who was another conduit, for receiving funds and I would be the means of getting the funds to a network of comrades on the ground. Beyers had an office in Braamfontein, with Jesse Duarte as his assistant. I would make an appointment, go in and we would chat about the sorry state of the church.

He would give me a pen and paper and I would write a number on it. While still talking, he would reach into his desk drawer and pass me as much money as I had asked for. I always had a carry bag full of shopping and I would have a cornflakes packet in it, which I had emptied and into which I would put the money. That's how it would be carried all over the place and eventually handed to the operations comrades on the ground.

Once I was traveling to Johannesburg from Pietermaritzburg for an ANC meeting. We had been instructed not to travel by air under any circumstances because the system was monitoring who was arriving, following them, and then having information about anything that was being planned.

I decided to travel by train and found myself in a compartment filled with racist white Afrikaner SADF soldiers. One guy in particular made me so angry that I decided to teach him a lesson. While everyone was asleep, I stole his uniform and put it in the bottom of my rucksack. It had all his ID documents and an entire SADF uniform. On awaking, pandemonium broke out throughout the carriage – but everyone agreed that a terrorist had done this and that they were long gone by now. It was also agreed by all that the hapless soldier would pay dearly for his lack of security. He was put off the train in Germiston covered only in a towel.

I then parcelled the uniform and documents and sent them to London, where apparently it sat on Comrade Heather Garner's mantle-piece for weeks while people came in and out too scared to open it, because it kept setting off an alarm because of the metal in the badge on the cap. I got a message from Reg, via my intermediary to say not to send any more of those clothes, because 'my aunt' had enough of them already. I remember Reg as a principled, direct, no-nonsense person. He was utterly dedicated. He was

disciplined and reliable. He was wise and he was humble. What more could one ask for in a handler?

Whoever one talked to one could be sure to get the same consistent appraisal of Reg September as Michael Worsnip gave here. Reg September was hands-on in terms of the underground struggle network in South Africa. Scores of operatives were briefed and debriefed by Reg September, and he did this work in a professional, caring, and courteous manner.

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The fourth perspective of Reg September comes from Professor Gonda Perez, today an accomplished academic and Deputy Dean of Under-Graduate Studies at the UCT School of Public Health and Family Medicine.

Algonza Perez, know more widely as Gonda, was born in Bridgetown in Athlone, Cape Town, to John and Lillian Perez, one of six children. Her parents were highly politically conscious and were strong believers in getting a good education, which laid a solid foundation for her later activist life, academic achievements, and career. She attended St Theresa's Primary School, a Catholic school in Welcome Estate, Athlone. She then started her high schooling at St Augustine's Secondary School but completed her matriculation at Livingstone High School in Lansdowne.

The teachers at Livingstone High School were very much in the Unity Movement mould and the Deputy Principal, Mr Richard Dudley, was well known to Reg September as an adversary. While there was a degree of mutual respect, they held very different and conflicting political positions. The school was a hotbed of political discourse and exchange by teachers as well as students. However, Gonda, Alan Liebenberg and others formed a

small tight group of Black Consciousness students who broke out of the discourse framework into activism. They belonged to SABSA (South African Black Students Association), which was frowned upon and isolated by the Unity Movement people, who were somewhat elitist and rather opinionated. They focussed on their own circles rather than taking community action.

The Perez home, however, opened up a whole different world to Gonda and her siblings as it came to be a meeting place for Black Consciousness Movement activists in her matric year. Gonda was exposed to people like the activist poet James Matthews and political activist Johnny Issel, who had a very different practical grassroots politics of the working class. The broad BCM, SASO and the BPC world was a totally different political world to that at school.

Personal consciousness, the freeing of the mind, realising one's own potential and building self-esteem and confidence not because it was an end in itself, but as part of a broader community where it meant actualisation of the power of the poor – the many rather than the few. It was also an awakening to the fact that class and colour almost absolutely co-related.

The true depths of deprivation and hardship faced by working people and the unemployed conscientized Gonda, as she ventured from a sheltered environment into the streets and homes of working people and engaged in pamphlet distribution activities. Black Consciousness ideas stressed that the power of the minority over the majority could only be successful through their application of “divide and rule” strategies and through imprisoning the mind.

Within the BCM the emphasis was on the unity of all persons who were not white and who claimed their dignity as Black people and as Africans by setting aside colour-coding labels. Gonda was further conscientised by

engaging with the Christian Institute and learning the literacy teaching approach of Paulo Freire, and by meeting people like Theo Kotze and Beyers Naude.

Gonda and her activist peers grew politically through the Black Consciousness philosophy and the ideas of Paulo Freire from Brazil. He taught that liberation was only achievable by what was called the “See, Reflect, Act and Evaluate methodology which was a continuous dialectical cycle”. Freire said that “Liberation is a praxis – the action and reflection of people upon the world in order to transform it.”

But Gonda’s learning curve was not just about a new philosophical consciousness. As she got more involved, Gonda realised too that there were dangerous consequences to travelling down the political road. The regime’s security apparatus was everywhere. Indeed, they found that infiltration had entered right into their circle. Ultimately, she as an 18-year-old and many of her contemporaries, like Alan Liebenberg, Daya Pillay, Roy Chetty, Jaya Josie and others had to flee South Africa and take refuge in the frontline states.

She and her husband Jaya Josie first landed up in Botswana. Gonda found it off-putting that exile had its own political dynamics, rivalries, and tensions among different BCM groups, and they had to plot the course of their futures independently. She and her husband got the opportunity to study in Algeria, where new challenges beset them as well as new opportunities for growth.

It was when she and Jaya travelled from Algeria to the UK on a holiday break that they first went to meet with Reg September, who was still Chief Representative of the ANC in the UK. It was through many such meetings with youth from South Africa that Reg came to grips with change and new

ideas and challenges to ANC thinking and even his own thinking in relation to the “Coloured Question”.

Reg was always wanting to hear and understand the new thinking and to learn about how new generations tackled solution-finding for new times. Reg did not have a tertiary education but what he had learnt through the school of life and political education was a special way of helping people to use their own untapped abilities for dealing with challenges and finding solutions.

Reg would assist youth to think through issues and he also very subtly allowed himself to learn as much from the youth as he could. In turn the interpretative value that he got from these engagements was shared with his President, O R Tambo, and other leaders in the ANC and the SACP. Reg deeply believed that plotting the way forward in the struggle could not be done in the abstract but had to arise from the arena of struggle at home. Therefore, all had to allow the dialectic to work so that the old and the new would interact to create the cutting edge in struggle praxis. This is just some background on the receptivity of Reg at the time of meeting Gonda and Jaya for the first time.

What follows is how Gonda remembers Reg September at that first meeting and indeed at other junctures in her life in exile and back at home post 1990. In her own words:

I first met Uncle Reg in 1977 in London where he was the Chief Rep, and Jaya and I were students on holiday from Algeria where we were studying. His first question to us was, ‘Where are you staying? Are you okay there? Come let’s go and get something to eat.’ This was typical of Uncle Reg – looking after people and ensuring their well-being.

At the first meeting he took us to the YWCA, and we had a good meal of cottage pie. We chatted about what it was like at home before we left in 1975. We spoke about what we needed to do. He was happy that we were studying

and encouraged us to complete our studies before trying to assist with the armed struggle. He reminded us that we needed qualifications to rebuild South Africa after the revolution. I was struck by his confidence that we would overcome Apartheid and would be going home.

The next time I remember Uncle Reg was in Lusaka after we had completed our studies and Uncle Reg was deployed to Lusaka. He welcomed us into his home for meals and talks about life in general and our struggle in particular. While we always wanted advice, Uncle Reg was not one to give advice. He would ask us questions that made us think through the issue – a method often used by modern coaches. We had to find the solutions to our questions ourselves.

We happened to be allocated a flat close to where Uncle Reg lived with his wife Gwen. We were often invited over for a meal and Uncle Reg popped in occasionally to find out how we were doing. Shortly afterward, Uncle Reg had to go into hospital for an operation. On his return he could only eat certain foods. We teased him about this, and Phyllis Naidoo still would still remind him in his later years about Jungle Oats we had to source for him from Zimbabwe.

On my 30th birthday, Jaya was away for training in the Soviet Union. I thought it would be a lonely birthday. I was woken up early with a knock at the door, and something being pushed under the door. Gwen had slipped a birthday card and an invitation to dinner under the door. Dinner that evening turned into a party with a few close friends there as well. Gwen also baked a cake with three candles representing my three decades.

The time in Lusaka was a turbulent time for the ANC. Furious discussions were raging on whether the ANC should open its doors to all or whether it should be an organisation for those Africans classified as Black only. Senior ANC members openly declared that they believed that the ANC

should be for Africans only (meaning ‘Blacks’ as per the Apartheid definition). The debates in the meetings of the branches were hot. People were divided on the basis of whether they supported ‘open membership’ or not. Uncle Reg in his dignified way, made his position clear. He did not ask for us to agree with him. Each one must make up their own minds. Nor did he judge those who took an opposing position. They had the right to their opinion.

At this time, I had to go into hospital for a small operation. Because theft was rife, when I was given a hospital gown, Jaya took all my clothes away for safekeeping. Unfortunately, soon after I came out of theatre, Jaya was called away on a mission. I was discharged from the hospital but had no clothes in which to go home. Reg arrived at the hospital to visit and learned of my predicament. His solution was practical. He had a blanket on the back seat of the car that he fetched. I was able to wrap that around myself until we got to their flat, where I could get into Gwen’s clothes. So, I walked wrapped in a blanket to the car and was driven across Lusaka.

We laughed a lot on the way. Imagine if we had an accident and I was found with no clothes and just a blanket? I stayed at the flat with them until my wounds healed. It was a single bedroom flat, and they gave up their bed for me. I was so moved by this.

Our flat in Lusaka was often used for meetings as Ronnie Kasrils shared the flat with us. I had to disappear to my room when those events took place. From my bedroom I could hear the quiet tones of Joe Slovo, the more passionate voice of Mac Maharaj, and occasionally Uncle Reg and Uncle Dan Thloome coming in seemingly to placate.

Shortly afterwards we were deployed to Harare and left Lusaka and the contact with Uncle Reg was rarer. Our next meeting was in 1990 when we were back in Cape Town. We were overjoyed at being back home and

immediately started work. Uncle Reg had an office where I occasionally helped out. His wife Hettie was with him, and I was again invited to visit when they bought a house in Rondebosch East. On hearing my predicament with accommodation, I was immediately invited to move into the back granny cottage. I was delighted as I had a quiet place to work to prepare for exams that I had to take to have my qualifications recognised in South Africa. I was made to feel part of the family and was often invited to meals. I had access to my sister's old car, and we were able to go out to rediscover Cape Town.

Despite the difficult situation – talks about talks, the violence in the PWV area – we were optimistic. At last, we were home and able to work on resolving the rest of our difficulties. Uncle Reg introduced me to the local SACP cell so that I could be reintroduced to political life. In this time my dad rethreaded an old 'riempie stool' for Uncle Reg. He was so proud of that chair. In my time with Reg and Hettie I heard many stories of his early life in Cape Town and his interest in finding out more about the slave origins of his family.

I moved to Johannesburg and the contact with Reg was rare. I heard that Hettie was ill, and I called Uncle Reg who informed me that the illness was terminal. On my next visit to Cape Town, I went to visit. Hettie was a shadow of herself. I was happy to have a few minutes alone with her. She and Uncle Reg had been so kind to me.

I occasionally used to see Uncle Reg who was then a Member of Parliament, when I attended Parliament for meetings. I had heard that Reg had re-married. In the meantime, my mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and it was becoming difficult for my Dad to cope. In 2000 I made a decision to move back to Cape Town to assist my parents. Jaya and I had divorced so it was relatively easy to move with my daughter Ayanda back

to Cape Town. I found a job at the University of Cape Town and met up with Lafras Steyn – a lovely person, and found out that Uncle Reg was married to his sister, Melissa. By coincidence I also met up with Dorrian, who invited me to dinner where Melissa and Uncle Reg were present. Our friendship could be re-established. Uncle Reg had found in Melissa a soul mate – an intellectual equal who challenged him and made him happy.

* * * * *

Of these few perspectives on Reg September by people who worked with him in the struggle, Ronnie Kasrils' perspective is the one from a fellow leader, who knew him longer than others and in many different capacities over six decades.

Yeoville-born Ronnie Kasrils was the grandson of Latvian and Lithuanian parents who had fled from the pogroms in the late 1800s. His family was from the upper strata of the white working class where his father was a salesman and his mother worked as a shop assistant. After matriculating he became a film-script writer and an advertisement film-director for the Lever Brothers Company in Johannesburg in the early 1960s. At this time, he was the secretary of the Congress of Democrats.

Because of his involvement in politics his movements were restricted, and his ability to freely seek employment was similarly restricted as a result of bannings. His political involvement also thwarted his desire to improve his education by going to university, and this led to his involvement in the underground resistance.

Ronnie Kasrils joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) from its inception in 1961 and by 1963 he had become the Commander of the Natal Regional Command of MK. He was soon thereafter forced to flee into exile, and this

was the beginning of his almost three decades of involvement in the liberation struggle abroad, serving in various capacities in London and all of the frontline African states.

Ronnie also completed advanced training in military engineering at the Odessa Military college in the Ukraine in USSR. In 1977 he served as a political instructor and regional commissar for the ANC camps in Angola. He did further courses in intelligence and completed officers' training at Brigadier General level. In 1983, Ronnie was appointed Chief of MK Intelligence and he served on the ANC's Political-Military Council in Lusaka from 1985 and on the ANC's National Executive Committee from 1987. He was also a member of the South African Communist Party Central Committee from 1985.

In 1989 Ronnie again went into the underground resistance inside South Africa as the senior operational leader in Operation Vula, and was able to resurface only in June 1991. At the ANC's first elective conference inside South Africa after the banning was lifted, Ronnie was elected to the National Executive Council in July 1991. He also was elected to the now unbanned SACP's Central Committee.

Ronnie Kasrils played a pivotal role in the integration of MK and the former South African Defence Force and served on the Sub-Council on Defence of the Transitional Executive Council. After the ANC won the elections in 1994, he was appointed Deputy Minister of Defence. Between 1999 and 2004 he was appointed Minister of Water Affairs and in 2004 he was appointed Minister for Intelligence Services.

During Ronnie's years of ministerial service Reg September also continued his service to South Africa as a dedicated public representative, a member of the National Assembly of the Parliament of South Africa. Here

Ronnie Kasrils provides some insights and perspectives of one of South Africa's great leaders to whom he looked for inspiration. Ronnie says:

I joined the liberation movement in 1960 after the Sharpeville massacre, became secretary of the Congress of Democrats in Durban. I was like a sponge soaking up everything possible about the liberation movement and heard about Reg September before actually meeting him. He appeared to be a well-liked and respected leader in Cape Town.

Sometime in 1962 George Peak of the Coloured People's Congress came to Durban to address members of the coloured community who were not particularly active. I am not sure, but it is possible that Reg was present, and I might have met him then. George was very charismatic and a good orator. A very large crowd attended the meeting which I seem to recollect was a hall in Sydenham or Newlands. George worked them up with his oratory and we were very impressed with the response. I made complimentary remarks to Billy Nair, one of the organisers, about George's ability. He said yes, George as an orator was unsurpassed, but the quiet man, Reg September, was the key organiser and administrator of the organisation in Cape Town and in his view was indispensable.

I certainly remember meeting Reg at a clandestine meeting of the Congress Alliance in 1962 near Chief Luthuli's Groutville home. Many top ANC leaders were present; among them Sisulu and Kotane, along with Luthuli; members of the COD like myself; and the Indian Congress such as MP Naicker and Monty Naicker. Billy Nair was present from SACTU along with Stephen Dlamini and others. Reg September had come up from Cape Town.

As a relative newcomer I was keen to shake hands with people I had heard of and admired. I do remember having a short chat with him when I introduced myself. I remember his very friendly smile, and the keenness and

kindness in his eyes, when encountering something or someone of interest no matter whether one was important or not – that made no difference to him whatsoever.

He struck me as such a modest person who made me feel important, for in a patently genuine manner, he enquired who I was and what I did. He even asked me whether I liked snoek and said when next in Cape Town he would braai some for me. He was interested in my work among whites and wanted to meet again so he could quiz me on the subject. Reg never pretended to be a know-it-all, even to a fledgling like me. This was a rare quality. He thought he could learn things from someone who was a recent recruit, and I was amazed. But I later on found that such interest never waned – whether in London or Lusaka.

That meeting had been called in response to the announcement of the Minister of Justice Vorster's impending Sabotage Act; and the future of the Congress Movement given the impending crackdown.

I met Reg again at the end of 1964 in Dar es Salaam. He had arrived there with Hettie a few weeks before I returned from almost a year-long training in the former Soviet Union. The venue was a small ANC residence on the outskirts of the city where half a dozen leaders resided, among them Moses Kotane and J B Marks.

My future wife Eleanor worked in the ANC office and resided in the same house, and I was joining her. Like the rest of us Reg and Hettie had to leave South Africa to avoid certain arrest. They had a difficult journey out as they at first slipped into Swaziland. He had been lying low in Durban so that was the nearest route out. They were there for several months before undertaking the dangerous trip back into South Africa again and on to the then Bechuanaland to Tanganyika.

He was very relaxed and acknowledged having met me before. Reg loved to tease people and clearly realising that I must have been in the Soviet Union for training and of course not questioning me about that, he pointed to my far from fashionable shoes of Soviet design, and tongue-in-cheek remarked that I could only have got shoes like that in London.

Of course, he knew a lot about shoemaking and proceeded to analyse everything about the object of discussion. I played along with him but was rather nervous as I was unsure of whether he was simply pulling my leg or not. It was that easy manner of his with his quirky sense of humour that endeared him to me as it did to so many others.

Before long we were transferred to a larger residence named after Vuyisile Mini where Oliver Tambo, newly arrived from London, resided along with some 20 MK recruits and ANC students. Other senior leaders were Ruth Mompati, Alfred Kgakong and Flag Boshielo who acted as Tambo's driver. Reg was put in charge of running the place. He was often in quiet discussion with Oliver Tambo, and I could see how the latter respected him and his views. Reg ran the place smoothly; supplies of all kinds including food and groceries were always available, even though in modest form and amount. Everybody had tasks including cleaning duties within the house and the very large yard among palm trees.

We exercised every morning and encouraged by Reg organised some sporting events and concerts including a 1964 Christmas party and New Year concert. Eleanor and I along with Reg and a few others would motor into town to work at the ANC office. Things went along very smoothly, with comrades moving in and out as they either went abroad or arrived back from training or studies. The settled atmosphere was disturbed sometime in 1965 when a group of some dozen PAC students, who had crossed over to the

ANC, were billeted at our residence. Within weeks they were causing trouble, refusing to carry out tasks assigned to them, and getting into fights.

Reg's leadership was under severe pressure. He was always calm under fire and showed no signs of panic in the face of a situation which was growing ugly. He sought to talk sense into the group and certainly managed to win over half of them, but the remaining characters appeared to grow more restless and threatening.

Moeletsi Mbeki was a recent arrival and Reg utilised his leadership qualities and the fact that he was a young student of the same age group as the PAC students to begin to neutralise the group entirely. One particular individual escalated the crisis when he raped a Tanzanian woman in a nearby village. The full wrath of the ANC descended on the culprit with MK comrades arriving at our residence to march him off to the police station.

After that, things settled down and peace was again the norm. One day Tambo asked Reg, Eleanor, and I, to join him in seeing off some VIP at the airport. We were driven by Flag Boshielo and accompanied by Alfred Kgakong who could be quite a difficult person. After we saw the VIP off Kgakong got into a terrible row with an airport official, a woman who happened to be of mixed race. It is quite possible he had imbibed some alcohol out of Tambo's sight and was intoxicated.

His racism had come to the fore and continued as we drove back to the residence. Trying to convince Tambo, who was clearly furious with him, that he was in the right, he lambasted the woman's alleged arrogance and put it down to her feelings of superiority as a Coloured. He paid no attention to us at all as he ranted on to Tambo that Africa had enough of minority groups calling the tune.

Tambo was not inclined to burst into anger in company and sat silently brooding. When we got back to the residence, he called Kgakong aside and

must have given him a solid dressing down. Later on, he called Reg, Eleanor, and I, into his room and quietly addressed us about Kgakong's behaviour, which he made clear was absolutely unacceptable, brought the ANC into disrepute, was not its policy and would not be tolerated. He went as far as apologising for the embarrassment it must've caused us.

Eleanor and I simply thanked Tambo. Reg had sat very quietly throughout. After a long pause he spoke with his trademark sincerity, going as far as saying that he was sure he was speaking for Eleanor and myself as well. He was that inclusive. He thanked Tambo and said how we appreciated his assurances which we any way took for granted knowing how principled he was. There was an underlying hurt that one could detect in the way Reg spoke, not concerned for himself as an individual, but for the so-called Coloured people and all the minority groups in our country, pointing out how important it was to maintain the ANC's policy and principles in order to win over the minority groups for the struggle. Tambo was clearly greatly moved and embraced him like a brother.

Both Reg and I were deployed in London from 1966 where he became ANC chief representative. While he was involved in public work I was involved in clandestine activity. From time-to-time South African students passing through London would walk into the ANC office keen to join. Reg and I had a very good understanding with regard to the possibility of recruiting for the underground. As quick as a flash he would send them off to a coffee bar to meet me or Aziz Pahad. We would interview them to assess how serious they were, whether they were genuine and not spies, whether they were suited for underground work back home. This could be a lengthy process and we had reasonable success with such recruitment. We certainly benefited from Reg's savviness and reliance in this regard.

There were quite a few times when together with Reg we met groups of select anti-apartheid activists to brief them on developments in South Africa. I recall how when I was first working in MK camps in Angola, at a very critical time in that country's struggle against UNITA, how he utilised me for such briefings when I was in London.

I worked with Reg in Zambia after his deployment there, when he was part of the Political Military Command (PMC) and a steadying influence. He was a member of the political committee whilst I served on the MK military committee. We also both served on the PMC itself. The political committee was composed of Joe Jele, Mac Maharaj, Jacob Zuma, and Reg September. They were a robust group and fierce arguments would often erupt particularly between Jele and Mac. I resided in a residence opposite their office. and it wasn't difficult to follow what was going on especially when angry voices were raised.

Reg waited for the others to blow off steam and one could hear his quiet and steady voice summing up at the end, paying no heed to the acute tension, as though nothing untoward had occurred. He simply recorded decisions and the practicalities of moving ahead. That was Reg in so many respects. The unassuming quietly spoken modest man, who never sought the limelight, who never attempted to upstage anybody, but sought to calm the stormy torrent, ignore the inflated egos, and keep focus on practical decisions.

Reg followed Tambo in many respects and here I refer particularly to his unifying quality and his steadfastness in keeping things on track rather than being diverted by personal agendas and rivalries.

It is not as though he was insensitive, for he confided in me at times how tiresome he found the antics of some of the comrades. He often invited me over to his very small and modest apartment in Lusaka for it could be very

lonely especially if one's family like mine was in London. His space was a calm oasis. The climate was hot and cloying and Reg simply wore a pair of shorts when he entertained comrades like me. I perceived that he walked around the apartment completely in the nude for when one knocked on the door he would call out 'Just wait a few minutes' and I believe that was to give him the time to become respectable.

He loved talking about his beloved Cape Town, the mountain, and the snoek which he so missed. He spoke about the times he had worked in an outfitters in London when he was a young man and I seem to remember that was where he learnt about shoes. The ANC's Rathbone Place office was not far from the National Portrait Gallery, and I wanted to catch Reg by surprise. So, I invited him out for a coffee break dangling the bait that I wanted to show him a special pair of shoes.

That did the trick and I got him into the gallery where an exhibition of Vincent Van Gogh's paintings was on display; one of which was of worker's boots. Reg was delighted and amazed. He so appreciated that painting, which he had never seen before, and I don't think knew about. In the end I had to drag him away since I knew he had an appointment back at the office.

His way of communicating was always with a light smile on his lips which generated a sense of a man at ease within his skin and a life he enjoyed despite all the sacrifices and imminent dangers where assassinations were always a possibility. Nothing like that ever put him off. He was a brave person.

As an MP in Parliament, he was hard-working and focused and struck me as the very person I had known working as the ANC's chief representative in London and his time on the PMC in Lusaka. Whatever role he was given he was the same Reg September. He stuck to his tasks in peacetime and in wartime with the same un-phased cool demeanour.

He was particularly interested in my water portfolio (*I served as minister between 1999 – 2004*) and offered very good suggestions concerning how best to reticulate water for the masses. My earliest portfolio was Deputy Minister of Defence (*1994 – 1999*) and he assisted me in my outreach to Coloured ex-servicemen whose participation in the Second World War had not been suitably recognised.

Reg September was a thoroughly honest man of the utmost integrity who loathed any form of corruption and would have been hugely disappointed at the way it has come to engulf the ANC and government.

I saw him at his happiest as his relationship with Melissa Stein developed. I recall him introducing her to me on the steps of Parliament and although they were not then admitting to any close relationship, and he merely introduced her as an academic, I could spot a mile off his affection for her. His affections were very transparent.

Last time I was with Reg was at his and Melissa's home in Johannesburg celebrating his birthday. By then he was quite ill, and his memory was fading. After we had sung happy birthday and so on, I led the happy group in the singing of one of his all-time favourites *Die Alibama*.

Every time we came to the refrain 'August, September, October, November, December...' I accentuated the 'September' pointing my finger right at him. He beamed with pleasure and so I repeated that several times.

A thoroughly decent, modest man who contributed so much, over so many decades, to the democracy and freedom our country enjoys. Those who knew him well have ever been affected by the warm friendship he gave so unstintingly. He reminds us that the struggle to change the world for the better was not only about the masses – and he never lost sight of the fact that it was they who make history – but how important the individual is, and the gift of personal friendship and love.

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Philip Balie and I were colleagues at Grassroots Educare Trust and Adult Education Training Centre for a few years when I first returned from exile working in the field of early childhood development amongst the poorest communities in Cape Town. He and his wife Sharon Follentine first met Reg September when they were in the UK working on a RESA project in Exeter while Reg was back in London. I also first met Philip while I was working in the Liberation Movement printing press. On Reg's return from exile Philip often availed himself to assist Reg with a range of activities including serving together with Reg on a housing trust and assisting him with his running of a constituency advice office when Reg was a Member of Parliament.

Here Philip gives us yet another glimpse of Reg the MP and community champion: During the 1st half of 1992 Uncle Reg, as I used to call him, said to me he was interested to buy property in a coastal town.

By that time, I have known him since the late 80s from our time staying in England where I also worked for RESA (an Education Research project of the University of Essex managed by Harold Wolpe and Elaine Unterhalter). Then back in South Africa I also served and worked with him together with Pete Smith another friend, activist and former UCT colleague on the Board of Zanethemba Housing Trust, a housing facilitation initiative to provide accommodation for returning exiles. Reg was not an aloof member of Parliament, but engaged with many poor communities and their projects as a champion. I cannot overstate just how much Reg September engaged in community work alongside his parliamentary work.

When Uncle Reg expressed interest in living on the coast, an old dream based on his youth experiences with his fisherman father, he suggested that we go on a day outing and explore property in Betty's Bay and Kleinmond. So, we agreed to go, and off we trekked on a Sunday morning with the inimitable Hettie, Sharon Follentine and two other families (strangely enough, one of the other families was also September, but no direct relation) to the Whale Coast.

Arriving in Keinmond, we stopped in the Main Road, close to the lagoon and beach, in the very small CBD. The Estate Agent of Kleer Properties then went to show us various vacant plots in a new developing area then called Heuningklip, now Heuningkloof. Reg had done his homework and asked all of the right questions just like he did in the political arena.

Having viewed a number of properties, and discussing it, we spent the rest of the Sunday afternoon in Kleinmond, having a wonderful, relaxed day before returning to the hurly burly of Reg's life as an MP in Cape Town. Upon our return Sharon and I decided to buy land in Kleinmond, but neither Uncle Reg nor any of the other two families bought property. Reg clearly had a different dream about coastal living than what he had seen on the trip.

This illustrates just how much we shared simple everyday life with Uncle Reg and assisted him with normalising his previously turbulent life, after he returned to Cape Town, and he so much appreciated it. We were all so aware of the depth of selfless sacrifices that Uncle Reg had made during the struggle, and it was beautiful to see him adjusting to normality.

I am writing this short tribute, with fond memories of Uncle Reg, from the house in Kleinmond. Having here provided a glimpse of Uncle Reg as part of our social life, may I leave you with a few of the impressions he left

on me as a community leader and political leader who had traversed an activist path for over 65 years, starting in his teens, long before I was born.

I often was often invited, and accompanied Uncle Reg to meetings and discussions, most notably when he was deployed to serve the people of Wynberg as an ANC Member of Parliament. He listened to people attentively, kept copious notes (in his black counter book), and often offered advice and opinion when needed. He was careful to ensure that those approaching him as an MP had a meaningful engagement. He was a charming politician and community leader who only wanted to serve his people and his country to the best of his ability, asking nothing in return, nor enriching himself.

He was dedicated and principled, sometimes at great cost to himself and his family.

Uncle Reg would have been horrified at the nefarious culture and kind of corruption that have been exposed over the last few years. It would have saddened him to see how some leaders of the ANC, and the Head of State between 2009 and 2018 was captured, manipulated, and corrupted.

Indeed, he would have been angered that nefarious forces undermined everything that he struggled for, and how his beloved country's coffers and the public purse were looted and plundered by a notorious underworld family and their friends. Uncle Reg's dream of a democratic state that served the social and economic advancement of the poor was overtaken by the rise of a creation of a parallel, dark state and an entrenched culture of destabilisation. He must be looking down on us, and his beloved country with deep disappointment and sadness.

Uncle Reg September was a committed, patriotic, selfless, and honest leader of the ANC both in exile, and in serving post-Apartheid democratic South Africa and her people.

My journey with him as a friend, community and political leader was a great learning experience, enriched by his commitment to political and public service. Thank you, Uncle Reg.

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In the last of these perspectives Zelda Holtzman gives her account of meeting Uncle Reg on two different occasions in Lesotho and in Lusaka.

Zelda Holtzman started in political activism while still at school during the mid-1970s at Bonteheuwel High School where she graduated in the class of 1978.

In the 1980s she was active in the ANC underground, in Umkhonto we Sizwe and in the SACP. Together with Michael Coetzee and Headley King, Zelda Holtzman travelled to Lesotho in 1980 to brief the ANC on political developments in the Western Cape and to receive training in underground methods. She first met Reg September in Lesotho on that trip. Later she travelled to Lusaka again, together with her younger brother, en route for further MK training in Angola, and again met with Reg September.

In 1982, the Maseru Raid by the SADF and Security Police took place in Lesotho in which 42 people were killed and in which ANC documents were seized that exposed the Western Cape networks. As a result, in 1983, Zelda, Michael and Headley were all detained.

In the trial Michael Coetzee was called as a state witness and when he had to take the oath, he shocked the court by saying, “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth: so, help me, Oliver Tambo.”

After the fall of Apartheid, in 1995, Zelda Holtzman was appointed a Brigadier General in the new South African Police Services, to head the Change Management Team tasked with the transformation of the police.

She served in this position until 1999, after which she became Deputy Commissioner of Police in the Western Cape with the rank of Major General. Later she was head of security at the Parliament of South Africa. Diligent in her position this led to a clash with corrupt elements within the administration of Parliament and she was forced to leave. In time she was totally vindicated in standing up for clean governance. This scenario led Zelda back into working in the arena of community advancement and mentorship of new generations of social activists.

Zelda speaks fondly about her memories of Uncle Reg September: I can only say that I was very privileged to have met him once by chance and another deliberate engagement while he was in exile.

My first encounter with Uncle Reg was when Headley King and I were undergoing political education and instruction in secret work. We went to Lesotho, known then as a forward area servicing the underground network of the Western Cape in 1980.

Uncle Reggie happened to have been in Lesotho at the same time. I'm not sure if he requested to see us or whether the ANC command structures thought it necessary for us to meet with him since we were from Cape Town. Either way it was most beneficial and inspiring to meet with a stalwart of the calibre of Uncle Reg.

He of course wanted to know everything that was happening in the country at the time. He was curious to learn about the nature and depth of the struggle against apartheid. He was particularly interested in the breadth of involvement of the Coloured community.

What surprised us was his take on the Labour Party. He was adamant that we should try to win them over. Although we pointed out that the LP was not a factor in the Western Cape, he still insisted that we should work with them. On reflection on this seemingly 'out of sync' perception held by

him, we concluded that his position was based on a deep belief that our struggle against apartheid must be an inclusive one.

We didn't debate the issue any further out of respect for him and his deep-felt belief in our ability to win over those among us who have been won over and seduced by the Apartheid state. We understood his objective to broaden the base of resistance against Apartheid.

What Zelda would not have been privy to at that time was that in 1979 and 1980 the National Executive Committee of the ANC were in deep discussions towards formulating strategy and tactics towards "political institutions which are imposed on the Coloured and Indian people of South Africa" and were in discussions with the Labour Party.

The ANC was looking at the question of whether it was possible to organise and mobilise within that environment. The ANC had taken the same approach with the Inkatha Freedom Party in earlier years and indeed with other Bantustan leaders and structures. It is often forgotten that the first split from the ANC was of conservative ethno-nationalist ANC leaders who had collaborated with the Apartheid regime and became Bantustan leaders. The Gang of Eight of the ANC-AN were a similar ilk, who were ultimately expelled from the ANC. Later in the early 1990s after the unbanning of the ANC many of these re-entered the ANC with the same conservative politics when an olive branch of forgiveness for their collaboration with the Apartheid regime was held out.

Reg had been instructed to engage with various people from Cape Town and to specifically report back with a comprehensive and balanced view on whether anything could be done, and if so, what. The ANC position was never to give up engaging with conservatives and collaborationists, only drawing the line in the sand when these involved themselves in repression

and war against the people of South Africa in support of the police and military.

The policy was that every space possible to be used, must be used. The facts show that numerically there were many more people classified as ‘Black’ who collaborated as junior beneficiaries of Apartheid than the population classified as Coloured who were in the same position. The Coloured middle classes and those who were quislings serving collaboratively benefitted marginally, but like the majority of other Africans the poor and dispossessed among Coloured people were in no better a condition in rural areas, in dormitory townships and informal settlements.

Reg and OR Tambo took a much more nuanced position as to how one should never give up trying to win back those in the quisling arena and the large constituencies that supported them, Black and Coloured. OR Tambo saw ethnic politics as a wedge of ‘divide and rule’ used by the enemy and therefore the ANC would be foolish to assist the regime in their driving of wedges between ethnic and so-called “race” groups. Indeed, he and Reg September believed in breaking down wedges and were highly alert to how the greatest weapon of disruption used by the regime against all of the liberationist structures was fermenting ethnic and “race” mischief.

Nonetheless it was a fine line that had to be walked and at the end of the day the last word in terms of deciding how to proceed as far as Reg was concerned was how the resistance on the ground believed should be the approach in going forward. In his final report, in which he presented views gathered from ANC sympathetic people within the Labour Party in discussions with the ANC, Reg also, in a balanced manner, reported that in the area where the largest concentration of Coloured people had residence, the Cape Peninsula, feedback showed that the position of boycott of the parties engaging in the tricameral parliament was the majority view. He

further said that the radical youth supporting the ANC and Alliance were of the view that participating in forums created by the Apartheid regime was pointless. So, Zelda, Michael and Headly's views were conveyed to the ANC leadership, and it held the day.

But Reg's work at many levels could also be seen from the strategy and tactics discussion document that he delivered to the ANC's NEC. He noted that as a result of some multi-faceted work with many different coloured constituencies in South Africa, the Labour Party leader, Rev. Allan Hendrickse, made a historic statement of support for the policies of the African National Congress.

Nonetheless Reg was scathing in his analysis that the Labour Party had failed to live up to their commitments to the ANC to engage in mass action struggles. At that stage the ANC had not given up on using 'participation as a site of struggle' alongside militant boycott and mass action. But in the strategy and tactics to be used with the coloured communities, Reg argued that the ANC had to focus on encouraging Mass Action and that in this context there was no alternative to Mass Action and finding common ground across township barriers. The time was ripe for building strong bonds across the Apartheid race silos by a 'Unity in Action' approach. The aim and the conviction expressed in the document was that by 1982 the ANC should have a membership representative of a cross-section of the entire population.

Zelda continues: Uncle Reg inquired about all his friends and comrades he left behind when he went into exile. He wanted to know about their well-being and developments in their lives and that of the families. He was hungry for news from home and took great heart at the knowledge of young people joining youth and cultural organizations. That we had reading groups and mass organizations greatly excited him.

His eyes twinkled with delight when we gave him an account of the mass democratic movement and the growth of civic, youth and women's organizations. He encouraged us to continue with resistance against apartheid and to grow the mass democratic movement whilst at the same time remaining vigilant. Behind his charming demeanour and twinkling eyes was a man longing to be in the trenches back home. I remember our parting was inspiring and sad. We were going home, but he couldn't.

I met him again in Lusaka a few years later. This time I was with one of my younger brothers. We were en route to Angola and had the immense pleasure of staying with him. With a mischievous smile he enquired whether the young man, referring to my brother, was my lover. This he needed to know to fix our sleeping arrangements. My brother who was barely 16 years old, just cracked up laughing as I informed Uncle Reg that Gary was my brother.

Secret work codes went down the drain with imparting that specific information, but it was Uncle Reggie who was on the Revolutionary Military Command structure. So, I assumed he could be privy to that information. He was just so sensitive, so human and gentle when it came to personal matters and needs of comrades.

I noticed, it was too obvious to miss, his trembling hands though he insisted making a pot of tea despite his shaking hands. Uncle Reggie was a great host and displayed, in a very practical way, his total lack of ageism and sexism by insisting on serving us despite our age and my gender. That will always remain as an endearing memory of a great man whose revolutionary ideals were displayed in words and deeds; a beautiful soul who gave so much and asked for nothing in return except commitment to the freedom of the oppressed.

The next time I saw Uncle Reg was after 1994 when he returned to SA. The reunion was warm and celebratory. He seemed to look younger and filled with youthful zeal. Birthday parties and lots of dancing followed.

He never lost his touch; always the romantic – good dancer and charmer. It all came so naturally to him without contradiction. He and Melissa cut a beautiful picture in their embrace on and off the dance floor. He will always be our Uncle Reg.

12

The debate on the term “So-Called” and return from exile

As the ANC in exile, the UDF (United Democratic Front), broader MDM (Mass Democratic Movement) and COSATU, which had emerged in the 1980s, began to engage with the ANC regularly, a new openness developed within the liberation movement in the world of ideas and discourse. Nothing was now exempt from debate and discourse. The transition of the exiled movement saw it using small steps to re-establish itself as an openly organising movement back inside South Africa. This began in 1984 as a prelude to its unbanning in 1990. Key figures in internal organisations, openly operating inside South Africa, particularly after the Kabwe Conference in 1985, were also clandestine members of the ANC, and some even of MK.

Reg and the older generation of Coloured activists in the ANC began to get their fingers on the pulse of the youth who were asking many questions, particularly about identity. Initially the response of some in the ANC was sharp and prescriptive but as a result of a particular debate – the debate about the term “so-called” and the using of quotation marks when writing or talking about Coloured people, which they opposed – a greater openness to discourse and change appeared.

Both sides of this debate ended up learning much and moved away from rigidity around tackling this question allowing for a plurality of views. Essentially people agreed that using the term 'Coloured' could not be avoided but in so using the term it did not mean that the term was acceptable, nor that race-classification was acceptable. People also moved away from the disparaging use of "so-called" which Reg hated and saw as the denial of the existence of a multi-ethnic creole people. He and others like Alex la Guma felt insulted by the use of "so-called". They worked hard to clearly establish that just like other sub-cultures and ancestral-cultural heritage was recognised in its plurality among fellow Africans, as Sotho, Xhosa, Zulu etc, so too did communities of Africans exist who were labelled as 'Coloured'.

It was appreciated that the future challenge would be how to self-identify with different positive terminology rather than the imposed colourism term 'Coloured'. But at the root of the difference between the older Coloured liberation movement figures and young Black Consciousness orientated intellectual figures among Coloured youth was the notion that some held, believing that there was no African sub-culture when it came to those classified as Coloured.

The suggestion was that there was no distinct history and ancestral-cultural basis for saying that Coloured people exist and that it's a totally constructed identity. Reg September, Alex la Guma and others disagreed strongly with this and felt that besides the fact that the term "so-called" suggested that there were no Coloured communities, that it was also complete nonsense to suggest that communities so-named do not exist. They also challenged those among intellectuals who argued that Coloured people were a conundrum and were a non-homogenous multi-ethnic anomaly. If one examined history outside of the colonial and Apartheid paradigm, all modern African social foundations in South Africa are founded on non-

homogenous multi-ethnic societies. This affected the enforced assimilation of numerous African societies into the Native category with its artificially created 9 linguistic nations as much as it affected the assimilation of numerous African societies into those classified as Coloured. Reg, Alex, and the others had felt that intellectuals had tied themselves up in knots and could not see the wood for the trees.

Reg supported working towards a consensus over time on the “Coloured Question” which he believed could not be resolved under conditions of repression.

This issue is one that bridged Reg September’s exile activities and his return, because once back inside South Africa Reg took a lead in encouraging debate and discourse on these matters. One of those initiatives was the “Roots & Visions Forum” and its public assemblies that drew in a broad cross-section of people and particularly thought-leaders from Coloured communities. Reg believed that such public participation had to be encouraged and that leaders within communities need to stand up and lead the discourse and not shy away from tackling these difficult questions. The ANC did not have a monopoly on such matters and needed to be able to hear what communities thought. He felt that the ANC was too remote from community thinking and needed to address this remoteness.

Evidence shows that eight years before the watershed Kabwe Conference, Reg September had taken steps to get a discussion rolling about the place and role of the minority black communities in the struggle – Coloured and Indian. This is included a three-page memo penned on 2 September 1977 to a select group of comrades including Yusuf Dadoo, Mac Maharaj, and Alex la Guma. The memo takes the form of identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats involving the relationship of the ANC to Coloured and Indian communities.

Reg concluded the memo: *Certainly, I believe that if we are serious about fully harnessing the loyalty and energy of black minority groups, then it is going to require a bold and forthright decision on our part (the ANC and Alliance partners) to embrace them on a basis of full equality; offering them the full membership with all the responsibility and privilege that membership normally entails.*

I believe that such an approach will enable us to confidently recruit the best elements in the minorities.

I believe that the stage has been reached for the ANC in practice to take on the responsibility of guiding and leading the whole country. The challenge which now faces us is to develop a single loyalty within South Africa. This I believe will be an important vehicle in the tremendous struggle which faces us against the balkanisation and fragmentation of our country.

Reg used the terminology of “black minorities” and not the imposed “non-African minorities”. The memo was written at a time when the ANC still had a fairly rigid view, allowing only persons of Sub-Saharan African roots to be full members of the ANC with all the responsibilities and privileges and not just conditional members.

In this memo Reg September shows exactly how much of a thought leader he was within the national liberation movement. He was also the embodiment of the tradition of that forward-looking foundation movement, the National Liberation League, which so indelibly left its mark on the once conservative ANC and on left resistance politics in general, inside, and outside of the Alliance.

The broader analysis in the memo shows that Reg September understood what was happening in Coloured and Indian communities inside South Africa and was avante guard in bringing about change within the ANC. It also shows that there was clear continuity in the thread of his thoughts from

the early 1960s, including the Morogoro deliberations, where he called on the ANC to deal with black minorities in a different manner to the white minority.

At that time, he argued that black minorities should have full membership of the ANC, but his view did not win the day. Reg demonstrated that he was disciplined in accepting the majority view at that time although it did not incorporate his view. But here in 1977, and again in 1979, without being schismatic Reg raised this issue again and again. Right at the beginning of the memo quoted he showed that he did not want the issues that he was raising to cause divisions. He says, *'Under no circumstances would I like this to take on the characteristics of a campaign.'*

I raise these facts to counter some who project the image of Reg September as just a follower and claim that he held a conservative view, simply echoing the dominant voices within the ANC.

One should never misinterpret Reg's gentlemanly and quiet character as being that of a "yes-man". The same applied when Reg opposed the use of the term "so-called Coloured" or the placing of the term coloured between quotation marks. This was not, as some interpret, an endorsement of the term Coloured, but rather his employment of strategic thinking while at the same time playing the longer game. Reg always took the bull by the horns, with a smile on his face, and this defined him as a thought leader.

Reg September asked: *Was Basil February (Paul Petersen) a "so-called" person? Am I a "so-called" person?*

No! Neither I, nor countless others, can allow ourselves to be reduced to being labelled "so-called". This term used for human beings is insulting and it effectively robs people of identity. Regardless of the origin of the word Coloured and regardless of the fact that significant numbers within the community find the word Coloured problematic and insulting, and I understand why, it is our reality – it is

the term that people live with for now. Our people's whole lives are affected by laws and practices based on identifying us as Coloured. We cannot ignore this.

Come a time in the future we will have to deal with objectionable terminology, but for now we cannot simply prescribe a new term. That would just be doing exactly the same as the colonialist administrators at the beginning of the Union of South Africa did when they foisted the umbrella term Coloured on a range of peoples.

One cannot wish away the fact that a Coloured people exists and then insultingly call ourselves "so-called". We have to work through this aspect of our struggle step by step, and the first step is to build African Consciousness and solidarity with our African brothers and sisters, so that we claim back our African roots. Then instead of repeating what we are against we will need to be innovative and inclusive in whatever way we choose to be known as."

One remembers such crass argument and phrases such as that of Marieke de Klerk defining Coloured people as – “the left-overs”. Reg September saw the use of “so-called” as being in the same vein of insult. Reg rightly asked why only coloured people were singled out in critiquing verbal and social engineering. ‘Surely,’ he said, ‘Whites and Blacks’ were also objectionable colourist terms, if one thought about this properly.’

Reg felt deeply offended about the historical ignorance displayed by some who claimed to be progressive thinkers, but denied the distinct and definable ancestral-cultural heritage that pertained to Coloured people. Reg argued that people’s identities were informed by their experiences of colonialism, dispossession, genocide and ethnocide, slavery, indentured labour, de-Africanisation, and Apartheid.

Historical circumstances and the common experiences to which people were subjected, tell a coherent story of identity formation. In the latter years of his life Reg was interested in the fact that there are more than 195

tributaries to the ancestral-cultural origins of Coloured people. He found Dr Neville Alexander's use of the Kai !Gariep river analogy in explaining Coloured identity most interesting. Reg September felt strongly that the very real story of Coloured peoples could not be wished away and that how self-identity could be explored as a means to find more acceptable terms than Coloured should be pursued. Restorative memory should be a quest that helps to resolve this question of restorative justice.

Reg found the ignorance among coloured intellectuals about the coloured experience to be astounding at times. Most could not give a common coherent account about where those classified Coloured arose from in all its facets, nor could they coherently explain how this classification came about or where the term came from.

Reg blamed the intellectual ignorance on the academic institutions which were heavily endowed with colonial approaches to knowledge and mythologies. The history of the terminology used to identify persons of multiple-continent ancestry but who emerged as an African creole people constantly changed, over 360 years, from labels like Free-Blacks, Orlam Afrikaners, Mixed-Other to Coloured, and then with seven sub-categories defined by Europeans.

It was further baffling to Reg that some thought that the terms Coloured and Coloured people only came about with Apartheid in the 1950s, whereas it had a longer and complex history. He found it puzzling how emphatic some were on the subject of Coloured sub-identity among Africans. Few knew that for over 50 years the British administration of the Cape Colony had used the term Coloured people in their reports to the British Parliament where they defined Coloured (using derogatory language) as "Kaffers, Bechuana, Basotho, Mfengus, Hottentots, Bushmen, Malays and Mixed-Other". In other words, the term Coloureds first meant all Non-Europeans

living in the British Crown Colony. Only in 1904 in preparation for the first census of the Union of South Africa (in 1911) were those previously called the “British Coloured people of South Africa” separated into two silos of “Natives and Coloured”. At that time the term Africans was not used, except by those who resisted the colonial authority’s manipulations – namely the Kimberly African League of 1883 and the African People’s Organisation (1902) of Dr Abdurahman and Matthew Fredericks. Ironically most of the membership of those African organisations were people who were later labelled as Coloured.

In a crime against humanity a range of African peoples were herded together and forcibly classified under the term coloured in the 1911 census. The group included 4 181 Bushmen (San), over 92 000 Hottentots (Khoe) and over 288 000 Mixed-Other who were the descendants of African-Asian enslaved, Masbiekers, Liberated Africans, African indentured labour from British Africa, as well as a variety of other migrants Non-Europeans. There were also a number of assimilated European non-conformists who had integrated with all of these named peoples.

Reg was concerned that particularly with the Coloured middle-class intellectuals, whom he regarded as privileged, the emphasis was on the tiny European and the Asian component of their forebears rather than on the much larger African side of their ancestors. Today, with the availability of DNA testing, the history records are being complemented by science and show that up to 70 percent of Coloured people have relatively equal proportions of Southern African DNA associated with Khoe and San and with Sub-Saharan African DNA. The latter are associated with peoples such as the Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Venda, Ndebele, Swati, Tsonga and so on, as well as with West and East Africans. The other 30 percent of their DNA is Indian, Southeast Asian, Chinese, Eurasian and European.

There is no doubt that the questionably named Coloured people exist with rich ancestral-cultural characteristics and linguistics. Reg called on people to stop quibbling in irrelevant micro-academic and politicised debates and accept that Coloured people do exist as an important African sub-culture.

Address the terminology issue, he urged, rather than make it an excuse for factoring out and marginalising people. Because with marginalisation there also comes discrimination and persecution. The state too should accept that Coloured people are Africans and stop formally supporting unacceptable terminology. They should allow African creole peoples to self-identify with the various sub-cultures brought together under the label Coloured. But for this confusion to be overcome, Reg believed that progressives should focus on building African Consciousness and African pride among those classified as Coloured and address the quest for a dignified way of self-definition.

The usage of the term “so-called Coloured” had also crept into ANC statements and literature in exile and the underground and as a result an almighty rumpus arose, particularly from the older generation. All this exploded in the form of a raging debate in the ANC’s premier journal, *Sechaba*. Two things started the debate rolling. Alex la Guma wrote a letter to the editor complaining that *Sechaba* was tacitly endorsing a trend that used the term “so-called” and was endorsing putting of the term Coloured in inverted commas by publishing articles with such usage. He complained that this came across as an ANC position and that was problematic.

At that time, I was on the editorial board of *Sechaba*, the premier ANC monthly journal, and the second thing that launched the debate was my response in a letter to the editor. I raised the point that the ANC could not just ignore the fact that since 1976 young people had had a problem

accepting the label Coloured, and they were expressing this by saying “so-called Coloured” or by putting the word coloured in inverted commas. I argued that we needed discourse or exchange of views on this matter, to come to a consensus, rather than simply shutting down expressions or gate-keeping discourse because of our personal views or emotional attachments.

The editor of *Sechaba* published his own approach, that the ANC was not endorsing a view but could not shy away from a real debate inside South Africa where Coloured leaders, like Allan Boesak and others, were using this expression and challenging acceptance of the word Coloured. The editor said that a discussion of this subject was necessary and that the letters to *Sechaba* might well be the starting point for such discussion.

After the editorial board, myself included, discussed the consensus approach that had been hammered out among us, the editor of *Sechaba* wrote a review of Richard Rive’s book *Writing Black* and in the review made the comment: “Our striving for unity should not blind us from seeing the differences which if ignored can cause problems exactly for that unity we are striving to achieve. It is not enough to say ‘so-called Coloureds’ or to put the word Coloureds in inverted commas. A positive approach to this problem needs to be worked out because we are dealing with a group of people who are identifiable and distinguishable.”

In another letter to *Sechaba*, Alex la Guma, under the name Capey, replied in a blustery personalised manner and muddied the waters somewhat, but a more considered and critical approach was taken by Matthew de Bruyn in an article entitled “Coloured role in the national democratic revolution” in the SACP Journal *African Communist*.

The opening up of this debate proved very useful in the long run. The debate spread across the ranks of the movement, and also within South Africa and globally.

Reg September monitored and processed the discussions and also made his own views known. Finally, after gathering the emerging consensus, he officially took up the matter with the Secretary General, Alfred Nzo, and President O R Tambo, because he saw that the January 8th statement of the President of the ANC had used the term “so-called Coloureds” and placed the term “Coloured” in inverted commas. The Secretary General Alfred Nzo and President O R Tambo appreciated the thought and debate that had gone into the consensus that emerged. Reg did not employ bluster like Alex la Guma, but rather succinctly and unemotionally presented a solid, reasoned, one-page argument that captured the consensus reached by those of us who participated in the debate. This was the same argument that we in the Sechaba Editorial Board had collectively made.

The consensus reached had recognised that there were different views about the term Coloured and that there was legitimacy in the argument that the term was imposed by colonialism and carried negative meaning for many. It also de-Africanised Coloured people and was an assault on self-determination. But consensus was also reached that there was not widespread knowledge or understanding in the Coloured communities, or other Communities in South Africa, about the objections regarding the term. One could not just stop using the term Coloured, nor impose a new term.

It was commonly agreed that the awkward and contrived “so-called Coloured” phrase was questionable and could result in confusion and misunderstanding as to what was being said. To the average person the use of “so-called Coloured” came across as negating and demeaning of their existence as an identifiable national group. This term was causing hurt and negative reactions.

The consensus was also that there was no doubt that a distinguishable people called Coloured existed regardless of the terminology, and that along

with the term “so-called Coloured” there was a notion being spread by a few intellectuals that those classified as Coloureds as identifiable peoples did not exist.

This we all agreed was nonsense and that the terminology needed to be separated out as an issue, from whether or not Coloured peoples existed as definable social communities with a distinguishable ancestral and cultural framework based on over 350 years of definable and proven experiences. Like other African social sub-cultures there were also different communities which colonialism had herded into one forcibly assimilated identity and these all had a right to self-determine who they were. The San, Cape Khoe, Nama, Griqua, Korana and those of predominantly African-Asian enslaved heritage mixed with local indigene and some European non-conformist roots (the latter being those who today increasingly identify as Camissa Africans) had as much right to self-identification as other African sub-cultures.

The consensus was that we had a long way to go in order to undo the divisions caused by Apartheid and win substantial sections of the coloured communities to the aims and objectives of the ANC. There was a long way to go in developing an African consciousness among Coloured people and this would take a lot of hard work on the ground. It was agreed that further discussion should occur, but resolution and the use of positive and meaningful expressions around identity would only be possible once we had a non-racial democracy in South Africa.

Such a national conversation could then take place around Apartheid and colonial terminology, where we would be able to effectively deal with all terminology, not only coloured. Other terms, whether terms like “South Africa”, or terms like “Black”, and “White” should also be up for debate. Solution-finding cannot simply be done in a laboratory or only within the intellectual debating space.

This consensus, conveyed by Reg September to the NEC of the ANC, met the concerns on all sides of the debate and it was accepted that there was much more nuance to the matter than raised in the first salvo from Alex la Guma in *Sechaba*. Reg September once more rose to the occasion and showed thought leadership in this matter. He was able to steer people towards consensus and then to spread this consensus across the ANC where every publication and statement had already for a few years been using the term “so-called Coloured” and putting the word coloured in quotation marks. The practice did not cease in the writing by some, but it did decrease particularly in ANC statements and underground materials.

Here is an excerpt from Reg’s letter to S. G. Alfred Nzo:

“I believe that the way the regime has manipulated, misused, tortured, and prostituted the whole issue of differences between the different communities, causes an immediate reaction of black consciousness among our people. We, who have gone through the mill, readily appreciate this reaction. The use of the torturous term “so-called” when referring to a specific community is part of this reaction.

We however, who have the responsibility of leading our country, will need to display keen sensitivity in the process of struggling for respect for the values of the various communities in the struggle for a common denominator. We know that the situation of the relationship between different communities is fraught with serious problems and under no circumstances can we allow a belittling of identity, be it Zulu, Afrikaner, or any other community.

Whatever the origin of the term Coloured, there has never been any decision by the community to change the description.

I consider it completely demeaning to describe any group as “so-called” as if they do not merit any identity. I therefore propose that we cease the use of “so-

called Coloured” or Coloured in quotation marks in our official declarations and speeches. We have a long way to go yet in order to win substantial sections of the Coloured community to our side. Let us not make our task unnecessarily difficult.”

To President O R Tambo there is a brief memo together with the minutes of a meeting of *Mayibuye*, the publication, with this note from Reg:

“Dear Chief

Herewith a brief memo which speaks for itself: I certainly hope that you will be at our PMC meeting tomorrow so as to help resolve this “terminology” question, since I notice that Joe has put this item on the agenda. Should you not be here then do please find a way of making your views known. I am afraid that the issue is much more sensitive than most people realise.

With best wishes

Yours

Reg”

Also among Reg’s papers is a note on the letterhead of the Office of the President, in the handwriting of President O R Tambo. He made consensus the official approach of the ANC from August in 1984.

“Dear Cde Reg

Can we meet briefly re your note.

I have seen the publications you referred to.

Matla!

OR “

A note in President OR Tambo’s handwriting shows that they had the meeting, and the resolution.

“Agreed re so-called Coloured – that the prefix so-called not be used and that DIP (Department of Publicity and Information) be informed. – OR ”

Reg September took on those who used the term “so-called Coloured” after 1990 with the same passion, and got the ear of Nelson Mandela on this matter too. In a memo to Reg September, Madiba raised a number of points concerning the coloured communities and the ANC outreach to these communities. He called for a meeting on these issues.

Reg wrote back to Madiba specifically on the use of the term “so-called Coloured” and made the following comment: *I have marked this as urgent because we will not get the opportunity to discuss this matter soon.*

In as much as there are people who strongly object to being referred to as COLOURED there is a body of opinion which regards it as objectionable and demeaning to be referred to as “SO-CALLED”.

This has proved to be a very emotional issue which cannot be resolved very easily. In the circumstances, I believe it to be more correct to use – ‘the vote-less/disfranchised Black People of the Cape’ who were only offered the opportunity to vote for a discredited tri-cameral system (and please explain that this includes ALL the people of different shades). We would benefit by an exchange of views, except that it would be like disturbing a hornet’s nest and it can be ever so time-consuming.

The great value of this debate and the resulting consensus is that the derogatory “so-called Coloured” was removed from potentially becoming a dividing wedge. The debate also began conversations about the fact that we recognised that there were a number of social-cultural group identities umbrellaed under the label Coloured – namely San, Nama, Korana, Damara, Griqua, Cape Khoe, Masbieker, Kroo, Saints, Manilas, Chinese and a broad family of African-Asian creole people. For many who were conscious of these identities, the state-imposed term Coloured was objectionable, and

Reg understood this, but believed that we all need time and due process to arrive at broad consensus rather than to deny our very existence in a knee-jerk reaction. *(Today many now refer to the latter as Camissa Africans, named after the river-system that runs through the city and after the Watermans or Ammaqua or Kamisons – also incorrectly referred to as Goringhaicona – the earliest traders with the Europeans. They founded the port of Cape Town and embraced all who crossed the shoreline frontier. The Khoe term for all freshwater rivers in South Africa is lamma or lhamis. Camissa is the creolised version of lhamis sa – “sweet water for all”. Maps refer to Ammaqua and Kamisons).*

What was also made clear in the consensus was that the term Coloured was simply used pragmatically at that juncture in history and that sometime in the future, in a climate conducive to maximum participation, we might explore different and more positive terminology that would be neither racist, colourist nor ethnicist. The term Coloured was in this context seen as a temporal term.

Reg September emphasised that we would work on terminology but that it would be from the base of recognising that a number of African peoples labelled Coloured certainly did exist.

Reg constantly made the argument that: *“We have to go beyond what we reject, and it is high time we employed our minds researching and coming up with what it was that we stood for. How did we wish to be referred to and what was it that we projected when identifying ourselves? What changes could be made, moving on from the term Coloured, without denying communities of people who were so labelled. In doing so there was one non-negotiable and that was the need to develop a common African Consciousness with our fellow African brothers and sisters in their different historical cultural heritage groups”.*

It is now 28 years ago that through the Roots & Visions Forum, Reg started a process of public participation discourse to look at changing

terminology and building African Consciousness, just as he had promised, and this process has proceeded a long way down the path towards resolution in a free democratic South Africa. It is unfortunate that the ANC became alienated from this discourse through a lack of interest and respect for communities classified as Coloured, and that the few Coloured people who the ANC attracted lacked the gumption to challenge and engage in discourse on the subject, and had a poor understanding of the history of the debate in the ANC as most had joined the organisation post 1990. Even non-racialism within the ANC by the advent of the 21st century had been marginalised as the ANC poured new wine into old Apartheid wineskins by using the Apartheid framework of race-classification. As non-racialism receded the ANC got more and more caught up in ethno-nationalism and tribalism got a new life.

The San, Khoe, Korana, Nama, and Cape Khoe are now recognised as such in poorly drafted legislation. Although the courts found many aspects of that legislation to be unlawful, the legislation did nonetheless demonstrate that growing consensus is developing around self-identification outside of the Coloured identity paradigm. The legislation that has been set aside by the courts, also however did not recognise the majority of those classified as Coloured and who do not see themselves as Coloured nor specifically as one of the five named peoples – namely those many who refer to themselves as Camissa Africans.

It should be noted that Reg September left a legacy through the Roots & Visions Forum workshops and seminars and the people that he gathered together in this process of consultations and public participation. Over 28 years of these processes greater consensus arose, and more research has taken place. Reg also had a dream of establishing a place of memory and understanding at the Castle of Good Hope to work towards resolving this

question of self-identification and the terminology that we use for ourselves. That too has come to fruition through the establishment of the Camissa Museum at the Castle. Over 40 years has passed since he started saying that this issue will be dealt with over time and 28 years has passed since the Roots & Visions Forum started public participation discussions on the way forward. Hopefully legislators, government and the census of Stats-SA will stop using the Apartheid race-silo framework, a crime against humanity, that continues to label people based on 'race' theory, and for purpose of data collection to allow people instead to self-identify their ancestral-cultural affinity, just like they express self-identity of their faith.

In showing leadership in Coloured issue on his return from exile Reg was not only pre-occupied with issues of identity.

After his return to South Africa and during his period as a member of the first democratic non-racial Parliament, Reg September, in a letter to the *Cape Times*, countered an argument put forth by Prof. Richard van der Ross, in which van der Ross had lamented the dearth of Coloured leadership in the political arena and claimed that most were on the side-lines, saying, 'Let's just stand back and watch how others mess up.'

Reg countered this analysis, which he believed was making excuses for those Coloured people who abdicated civic responsibility on a "them and us" basis, with "them" being those labelled Black Africans. He also made a point of saying that it was nonsense that Coloured people were not in the forefront of political and civil engagement:

We today have the right to be on the common voter's roll, to be in Parliament together with all other representatives on a par with everybody else. The same applies to trades union and educational rights, to quote but a few. Some of our people are highly successful in business, even although we constitute only about

8% of the population. We can identify many of our people who have excelled in government – not as underlings but as equals.

It is surely incorrect to suggest that as a people we have no political aspirations. Our community has produced many leaders, men, and women, since the heyday of Dr Abdurahman, many of whom serve with distinction today. How can we be dismissive of the contributions of so many of our people?

We need to exercise considerable care that in the process of describing South Africa today we do not perpetuate elements of racism. We all need to bend our backs in the effort to heal the wounds of the past, to engender respect between all racial groups, to participate in the serious process of transition and building a new society, to contribute to the inevitable progress of the African continent. Without doubt our community has a great deal to offer. We therefore cry out for positive leadership that draws our communities into political participation in the processes that shape all our futures.

At every turn Reg September returned to the themes that he championed throughout his life – anti-racism, and building African consciousness and full participation in political and social development with all African brothers and sisters in the cause of building a new society.

At a more personal level, regardless of how Reg differed and sparred with those Coloured leaders that he disagreed with, he still regarded them as leaders and showed due respect. There is so much that younger generations can learn from this example set by Reg September.

Later in life, Reg did not remember every detail of the past, but he had many chambers of fond memories in his head. An old chum of Reg September's was Dick Parker. When Reg says in the quote below that he met an old friend by chance... and what a lovely meeting; it really meant so much to him. It revealed the deep sadness that exile had created within him, a hurtful gap between him and those he loved. His face lit up and his eyes

sparkled at such meetings. The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish captured this exile experience most aptly when he wrote, *'We travel like other people, but we return to nowhere.'* Reg penned this memory on the occasion of Dick Parker's 80th birthday:

Eighty years of age – you, Mavis, two wonderful children, children-in-law, and grandchildren. Look at them with pride – congratulations.

Dick's role in South African society – funny, our youths so similar – New Era Fellowship, People's Club, both progressive organisations. And then Dick goes into education, and makes a life-long contribution. He also played an important role in the church. The same church to which my family belonged. At that time, I went in the direction of trades unions and the Congress Movement.

Then we entered a dangerous period in South Africa. I remember meeting in Edgar Maurice's study. I am not sure if Achmat Osman was there, but you certainly were there Dick, and Edgar and I. We talked about the problems teacher's would face if they tried to engage the liberation struggle. A challenge they would have throughout their lives.

I remember the role which people in Wynberg played in looking after me when I was in hiding – he Sheikh of Ottery Road, Joe and Peggy Nasson, Dick's brother Dave, Hazel, and Rusty. I was later sent into exile – 27 years – came back in 1990....

And I met Dick once again by chance in the corridors of Parliament. What a lovely meeting.

Today we all have the right to vote. We worked in the same ANC branch. Dick carried his role ever so responsibly as he did everything in his life. Thankyou Dick, Mavis, and your family for the service which you have rendered to the community and to the country.

In February 1990 President F W de Klerk announced the release of Nelson Mandela and political prisoners and the unbanning of the ANC,

SACP and the PAC. That was when the first leadership group, including Reg September, made their way back home. The formal engagements that followed are now a matter of public record and in the literature analysing the transition to democracy. Here it is important to note that it was just a really small ANC team that returned to South Africa to start direct talks with the Apartheid regime and Reg September was given the position as Convenor for the Interim Leadership Core for Western Cape with Trevor Manuel as his deputy.

Most people who have experienced going into exile will tell you that the experience of returning to South Africa and integrating back into South African society was often as difficult as the experience of leaving. It was the same for Reg September. He was the Western Cape leader of a carefully selected Interim Leadership Core drawn from a mix of external ANC leadership and the emerging internal ANC leadership who were high-ranking leaders within the UDF, MDM and COSATU.

Outside of this tight group and a small technical support team, the vast majority of existing ANC members, its structures and MK would remain outside of South Africa for up to around 36 months, through the main negotiations period, and while new ANC structures were being established. Unfortunately, among those left out were important figures representing the most progressive political positions in the ANC. This disadvantaged the ANC, and the most challenging political positions of the liberation movement were watered down. The regime and its international conservative corporate and right-wing backers were a lot more in control of the negotiations period than many care to admit.

The ANC doors to membership were thrown open willy-nilly and the organisation was literally recreated inside South Africa from the MDM and UDF structures. In many ways this changed the character of the ANC

overnight. It put a huge onus on that element of leadership which had moved into South Africa, including Reg September, to work overtime in ensuring that at least some core revolutionary and ideological characteristics of the ANC remained alive. It is debatable whether the ANC was able to achieve this task, particularly since mischief abounded and powerful white business establishment figures went all out to schmooze the cocktail mix of new leadership. Only two to three years later most ANC cadres, MK soldiers and political prisoners were welcomed home in dribs and drabs to an ANC that was hardly recognisable in many ways by this stage.

The entire Bantustan collaborator personalities and infrastructure, also originally born out of the ANC historically, were welcomed back into the organisation or simply joined as new members of the open ANC and this affected the character of the ANC. Much dishonesty entrenched itself in this process and it marked the beginnings of a corrupt culture in politics. A new ANC political culture had developed and what was won in struggle was somewhat compromised in the peace processes.

Reg September was quite realistic as to what was achievable and what was not, and expressed his views on the situation pertaining at the time. He explained that the liberation struggle had achieved much in terms of making the Apartheid state unable to reasonably govern the country in the same fashion that it had done in the past. It was for progressives now to win space which had opened up, but this space was also up for grabs by the free-for-all scenario that it presented.

The international campaign to isolate South Africa economically through sanctions and divestment had also hit the Apartheid regime very hard. The geopolitical environment across the globe had fundamentally changed and mass protests and civil disobedience throughout South Africa, complemented by a strong underground resistance movement and

increasing armed activity, all brought about a scenario where the Apartheid regime was in serious trouble. While the liberation forces all round were quite buoyant and in an advantageous position there was no scenario of a triumphant liberation war victory. Nobody had won a war for liberation.

The Apartheid regime had not been thoroughly defeated. At the time Joe Slovo described the situation being 'a mutual siege situation'. What was at hand was a new struggle about who would win the peace and how much could be won by the popular forces fighting for the transformation of South Africa. This new struggle, Reg believed, would be as dirty as the war of the last four decades had been. There was always the possibility that the liberation forces could lose the peace if cohesion within the ANC was lost.

Reg was absolutely clear on the state of the balance of forces at this time in South Africa. The liberation movement in all facets enjoyed many advantages over the Apartheid regime, both internally and internationally. All four pillars of the struggle had grown from strength to strength. There was a very high level of mass mobilisation and mass defiance, which had rendered the Apartheid state unworkable. The building of the underground had laid a basis for exercising political leadership and for intensification of pressure on the regime. On the international front the world was united against Apartheid and was in part treating the ANC as a government in waiting.

But at the same time Reg would point out that the liberation movement faced objective weaknesses. Changes in Southern Africa, particularly where the ANC and MK had its rear bases and logistical lines, were making it increasingly difficult for the ANC to conduct the struggle. There was no longer a visible intensification of the armed struggle, and the international community was making renewed efforts to impose a settlement plan. The ANC was challenged to ensure that the strategic initiatives remained in its

hands and that it was not seized by external forces. The meltdown scenario in Eastern Europe at the time hastened and exerted pressures on both the Apartheid regime and the liberation forces. Multiple factors had set the stage for a negotiated settlement in which neither the liberation movement nor the Apartheid regime alone dictated the circumstances.

These forces were not static as the Apartheid regime had not halted repression; nor had the liberation forces halted the struggle. A low intensity war continued during the negotiations. Despite the unbanning of political organisations and the limited release of prisoners, the Apartheid regime was still in a strong position and in control, with access to state resources, security police and military resources. The Apartheid regime also still enjoyed the support of very powerful economic forces inside and outside of South Africa. It further developed a ruthless counter-insurgency apparatus and manipulated the situation on the ground with 'third-force' violence. The liberation movement was militarily far from able to neutralise these strategies and tactics of the Apartheid regime. Alongside this corporate South Africa and corporate and conservative foreign state forces were heavily meddling in shaping the solutions to taking South Africa forward. This was no longer in the hands of the people, but rather in the hands of multi-party, academic and corporate think-tanks.

However, as a result of the combination of mass action on the ground and adept negotiation strategies, elements of progress was being made steadily. The Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) Declaration of Intent, the Record of Understanding, broad consensus on the need for an Interim Government and a Constituent Assembly, and a carefully considered National Unity Government tactic could all be considered victories of a sort, which gave the liberation movement some advantage in a transition (but also sometimes some illusion of advantage) that would

qualitatively tip the balance of forces in favour of much watered-down liberation movement positions.

Reg noted that contrary to some opinions, the liberation movement had always seen peaceful negotiation as the preferred option over military action. The negotiations option was therefore a victory for the liberation movement and a failure of the Apartheid regime, which had always relied on state and military strength to subjugate the majority people of South Africa.

Reg was always a strategist and a great tactician. He maintained that one should never take one's eye off the balance of forces and always seek to be getting the upper hand. This meant that, at each stage of the negotiated outcomes, the objectives and long-term goals would dictate the need to enter into specific, and even changing alliances and also even make certain compromises necessary to advance. There was a kind of permanence of revolutionary struggles. It was never a single event or accomplishment. For Reg, in the long term, even when the ANC came to power, the struggle would not be over. Counter-insurgency right-wing forces, corporate interests, antagonistic imperial powers, global organised crime, and the widespread surrogate forces of these – broadly together known as the "Third Force" would not fold its arms and simply disappear. These forces would repurpose to neutralised, bring down or even take over the ANC and the state, if progressive forces were not conscious of this deeper struggle for the soul of South Africa.

For Reg the fundamental goals of the struggle were something that people should not confuse with the immediate objectives within the negotiations scenario, for which the liberation movement had set transitional phases. Reg warned that in pursuing these immediate objectives the movement should be very careful not to do things that would in fact block its longer-term goals. And here Reg was talking with two different hats on

his head: that of the socialist in the SACP and that of the ANC national liberationist. The greatest challenge that would determine whether we would lose the peace while winning immediate objectives was whether favourable conditions could be achieved for bringing about radical social and economic transformation. It was a tricky situation because the leadership also always had to gauge what the appetite was on the ground. It was always tempting to evaluate this on the basis the numbers of protests and supporters and their actions and demands. However, these were a relatively small subset of society as a whole. Reg would always caution that we must not fool ourselves into thinking that the vast mass of South Africans was bubbling with revolutionary fervour.

The long years of struggle had shown us that clearly this was not the case. Reg said: *In setting objectives in the negotiations, the movement had to bear in mind that it could not achieve at the negotiation table that which we could not achieve on the ground; everything depends on a realistic assessment of the balance of forces. We will also have to keep in mind that in creating the infrastructure for establishing a non-racial democracy, we do not complicate it so much that ordinary people, denied democracy for so long, are unable to make that democracy work for them. Democracy can easily simply become a middle-class affair or something that parties get up to, far removed from the average person.*

Reg distinguished between Party Power and People Power and cautioned that the ANC understand the difference and not get carried away and become cocooned into its own world. At the time Reg was not sure that we had not made some strategic mistakes in how we approached our return to South Africa and how we abandoned some of the greatest elements of our machinery in the struggle. We allowed the tight cohesion of the liberation movement to break up too early by immediately throwing the doors of the organisation wide open and also prematurely folding up the MDM and UDF

structures, rather than ensuring that what he called “People’s Assemblies” to become part of ongoing political infrastructure.

Key ANC structures like the Department of Publicity and Information were abandoned in exile along with the equipment and trained cadres. Decisions were taken at a meeting of the Interim Leadership Core in May 1990 that the UDF Media Group give guidance and that Zwelakhe Sisulu be seconded to the DIP from the newspaper *New Nation*. Saki Macozoma was to be seconded as well. People like me, and others, who were full-time cadres running a very effective ANC printing press and radio in exile, opened up the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper to see adverts for the very jobs that we were doing, now being advertised, and we were unable to apply for those posts.

There was no organisational memory and continuity when the ANC emerged from the underground. The same applied to every aspect of ANC structures and it caused a lot of problems throughout the organisation at the most crucial stage of the struggle. Caution and security were also thrown to the wind, which allowed for mass infiltration of the ANC. All of this left the ANC vulnerable, and our enemies exploited this vulnerability to the full as time would show.

In many ways the scenario being faced reminded Reg of the early days when the ANC was establishing itself in Tanzania and London. In the world of ideas, strategy and tactics, the characteristics of a liberation movement were replaced by the characteristics of a broad-based Civil Rights movement. Going into exile to establish the external mission of the liberation movement saw a contest for its soul, and the return to South Africa was again a struggle for the soul of the movement.

All involved over the past decades were reduced to starting again from zero. University based think-tanks replaced cadres in developing policy. A

national liberation movement with strongly socialist-leaning cadres was replaced with a broad social democratic and liberal democrat orientated movement. Within no time ANC branches proliferated with mainly MDM and UDF people signing up for membership but also a mass of collaborationist forces too. The branches were nowhere near the quality of the old ANC branches under conditions of illegality.

The Interim Leadership (Core) Group became the mainstay for interfacing with the regime in talks and for steering the emergence of a new ANC machinery inside South Africa, but most often they found themselves more cloistered in talks with the regime and our former enemies than spending time with the oppressed and their structures. Reg September recognised this as a grave danger.

As a testament to Reg's selflessness, servant-leadership, and humility, he spoke to Nelson Mandela and made a strong argument as to why it was important for his deputy, Trevor Manuel, to take his place as the main Western Cape figure in the Interim Leadership Committee, because he had more of a finger on the pulse of the province due to not having left the country. Reg thus handed over the reins to the younger man – a rarity in South African politics. Reg showed by example that jostling for leadership and turf wars was not in the interest of the struggle. It is unfortunate that the ANC did not really see and recognise this selfless act and that resulted in an almost airbrushing out of Reg September's pivotal role in being a leader of the same stature as OR Tambo and Nelson Mandela. Reg September's contribution as a leading stalwart of struggle and the building of the ANC profile internationally has unfortunately been marginalised. ANC history does not reflect the pivotal importance of this Coloured leader.

Those UDF/MDM people drawn into the ILG were ones that had links to the ANC underground, but the Secretary General Alfred Nzo made it

very clear that those who occupied responsible positions in both the UDF/MDM and the ANC would need to resign their positions in the UDF/MDM. The principle was that all appointed to positions of authority in the ANC are so appointed by virtue of their now having membership of the ANC. This signalled the later dissolution of the UDF, although de facto it had already become defunct through neglect. It was a poor and hasty decision on the part of the ANC on its return.

By May even the ANC branding had changed in spite of the lack of broader discussions in the ANC or the ANC DIP network. The ANC logo was altered to drop the historic wheel of the Congress of the People and it was replaced with a multi-spoked wheel representing progress and the “wide variety of forces” within the liberation movement, which reflected the MDM constituencies. The colour red for the blood that was shed and for socialism was also removed from the logo. The justification of the change was also couched in a critique of the four spoked wheel being representative of the South African race-silos of Apartheid. Though the ANC symbolically removed the wheel it did not remove its strong support of using the four Apartheid “race-silos” in its policies and practice as it set out on a trajectory to side-line important issues of the “National-Question”.

Reg September could see great dangers looming just over three months after the unbanning of the ANC. Reg was one of the seasoned leadership Cadres on the ILG; others were Nelson Mandela, Alfred Nzo, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ntombi Shope, Joe Slovo, Thabo Mbeki, Raymond Suttner, Trevor Manuel, Mohammed Valli Moosa, Ahmed Kathrada, Raymond Mhlaba, Arnold Stofile, Caleb Motahali, Benson Fihla, Henry Mokgothi, Elias Motsoledi, Kgalema Motlanthe, Aziz Pahad, Joe Nhlanhla, Steve Tshwete, Joe Modise, Terror Lekota, Harry Gwala, Thabo

Makunane, Alfred Xobololo, Jay Naidoo, Elijah Barayi, Popo Molefi and Wilton Mkwayi.

The context of this time is clearly projected by the issues for discussion at the 8 May 1990 meeting of the ILG:

Release of Political Prisoners; Lifting of the State of Emergency; Troops needed to be withdrawn from Townships; Return of Exiles; Repeal of Security Legislation; Ending of Political Trials; a National Programme of Action.

Effectively, the struggle was very much continuing, and infiltration and mischief were rife in the now unbanned ANC, though many of its leaders were meeting inside South Africa, and talks about talks were proceeding,

The ANC's leading thinkers like Reg September at the time were worried that, moving into the negotiation terrain as a site of struggle, a chasm was developing between the leaders caught up in negotiation mode and the members floundering on the side-lines. Raymond Suttner clearly articulated this in an ANC discussion paper in 1993 entitled *Negotiations – Site of Struggle or Site of Surrender?* He cautioned: "We should not underestimate the extent of dissatisfaction and disillusion towards the negotiation process by our membership and followers. In dealing with this we should not assume that presenting a series of diagrams and lengthy explanations of a negotiation process and scenarios, meets the problem. A report back is not necessarily a basis for evaluation of the type that meets the critical distance that has now opened between negotiators and many of the membership. There is a grave danger that many report-backs are unintentionally intimidatory demonstrations of expertise and do not really open the way for discussion of the questions worrying our members. The language of negotiations may have become disempowering in a way that makes it difficult for members to

find the words or space to raise what is really in their minds. In truth many members feel we are selling out.”

Reg said that he felt that Raymond Suttner had his finger on the pulse and that while the issues that he raised at this point might not result in immediate problems, due to current euphoria, they would certainly come back to haunt the ANC in the future. Reg opined that *‘Suttner may well be a prophet like John the Baptist crying in the wilderness.’*

Suttner concluded a thought-provoking paper by saying: ANC branches are not everything; they are only one locus of People’s Power. We need to return the people much more actively to the political scene We are dealing with the battle for democracy. The question of the day that occupies our mind and that of our enemies is what type of democracy we will have in South Africa. Imperialism has shifted in the sense that it may now be prepared to ditch some of its least savoury dictators... but while this is partly in our favour in that achieving multi-party elections and representative democracy for the first time in this country will be a massive victory, a decisive rupture with the past, it is nevertheless an incomplete victory. The battle lines will shift. Imperialism is resisting social and economic reconstruction and it believes that it is better able to prevent this by conceding representative democracy. But the battle in the first place is one for the character of the ANC itself. The way to sap democracy in South Africa is to remove the real inner strength of the ANC, to corrupt it.

Reg treasured this document of Raymond Suttner’s from the ANC Political Education Department and told us that it represented the kind of critical thinking required for these new times. He said that Suttner had correctly analysed that the seeds for the corruption of the ANC were being planted at this point in time and that the fruits of these seeds would constitute the struggles and challenges of tomorrow when he would be dead

and gone. The mistake of not turning UDF and MDM structures and constituencies into “People’s Assemblies” holding regular National Conventions was a critical mistake. It was also a critical mistake to just throw open the doors of ranches to anyone who could potentially capture those branches.

Reg had been responsible for the Political Education Department in Lusaka for some time and the things that Raymond Suttner raised in his paper resonated strongly with him.

At a different level, indications of Reg’s own thinking during those heady days of negotiations can be gleaned from a paper which he wrote at the time. It gives some insight into Reg’s mind in terms of the mix of strategic, tactical, and operational matters. It shows how much attention he paid to detail and behaviours and that he was prepared tackle negative tendencies within the ANC and the Alliance. It also illustrates that Reg the organiser and militant activist was still as fresh as he had been in 1939. The paper was produced on 24 September 1992 and entitled “Where do we go from here?”

Despite the passing of two and a half years since the releases and unbannings, the other side still refuses to move positively on issues such as:

- *Release of political prisoners.*
- *Weapons being carried publicly.*
- *Proper controls over hostels.*

Bisho showed the extent of the South African regime’s manipulation of its surrogates. The other side still intends to hold the reins.

Their intransigence must have the obvious effect of impatience on many of our comrades, and indeed wide sections of the population. The system needs to be

challenged, and in doing so we need to handle it in a planned way which benefits the whole organisation and our people.

It is vital that there will be absolute clarity in the formulation of our demands on the occasion of the opening of Parliament. The issue of the route, the objectives of the protest march, and the target must be very clearly agreed upon. Such agreements must be made public and should meet with the conditions of the accord of the National Working Committee. Such accord is necessary because this demonstration will not only be of regional importance, but of national significance, with potentially serious consequences for South Africa's political future.

There should be no perception that our region or any section of our movement is trying to hijack the process. The other side has been moving heaven and earth in trying to present such a picture, and it would be essential for us to ensure that we give them no reason to back up such a perception.

We need to have a full understanding of the legal consequences of our action, and whatever we do, the action must not be seen as an exercise in radicalism. Our region will have to bear the responsibility of carrying much of the organisational load with as much support from COSATU and the Communist Party as possible.

Our financial capacity and responsibility need to be checked carefully; for example, I do not think that we should bus crowds in for purposes of bolstering the crowd. We also need to take into account that bail money is becoming more and more difficult to find, especially in instances where people are found to be undertaking illegal actions.

We are in the process of trying to win greater support from AMONG MIDDLE-CLASS ELEMENTS. Therefore, whatever we do needs to be done openly and publicly, and be sufficiently attractive so as to win more and more support from those sections of the communities which are yet to be won over. If we, in our public statements declare that we need the support of business, internal as well as external, and that we need the support of all racial groups, then whatever

we do must be sufficiently constructive as to attract such support and draw the people closer to us: they must learn to trust us. Under no circumstances must our actions look like stunts.

People must not get the impression that this is a take-over bid. Take-overs are usually not sustainable. The strategy which we design must of necessity have the support of the masses of people, will need to be highly organised and disciplined.

Success must not be measured by a few people being able to jump the fence, or even being able to take the President's chair, or use the microphone in Parliament.

Success should be measured by the extent to which we are able to carry the people of Cape Town with us in penetrating the domain of the regime. Our campaign must not only attract attention or admiration, but needs to attract participation and engender growth of support for our movement. Fighting to get into the grounds or into the house of Parliament will attract attention, but will not attract support nationally or internationally. Our action should not be seen as a gesture or an act of desperation.

What do we do in these circumstances? I believe that the time has come to make a significant mark on the negotiations landscape, that we are putting our foot down and drawing a line in the sand as far as the regime's intransigence is concerned; and bearing in mind that we are signatories to the peace accord, whatever we do, must be in keeping of the accord. We do not want to sabotage ourselves.

I believe that we can – especially now when it is becoming obvious that the regime is refusing to release our political prisoners – decide to join our imprisoned comrades, and fill the jails, accepting no bail.

For such a move, I believe that we can gain participation from a very wide range of organisations, even the churches. All of us, including some dignitaries, could possibly sit down as near to Parliament as possible and demand the release of political prisoners, all of us refusing to move, and courting arrest in this way.

We can no longer allow the regime to continue to decide our future, to decide the pace and depth of change. We need to free our country, if possible, peacefully, and free parliament in the process.

This was a typical guidance paper that Reg developed for discussion in branches. He was projecting that everyone needed to be aware of provocateur stunts in the guise of radicalism that could undermine political actions. He was also highly aware that the regime was trying to drive wedges into the liberation movement and to its advantage by keeping those they considered to be the voices of militants in prison and in exile and MK military camps for as long as possible. It was the regime's approach to try and extract as much compromise as possible by using the fate of political prisoners, continued exile, and distant MK as a bargaining chip in negotiations.

Reg argued that this was a red-letter moment in the struggle where the regime had to be shown that their game-playing was up. He also realised that if the ANC embarked on this action in a particular manner, it could be interpreted as insurrectionary and in breach of accords and that this could give the regime reason to react in an aggressive manner and gain international support. The situation was grave because leaders like Reg understood that there were those in the regime that were trigger happy and there were those among liberationists who were planted to create problems. There was also widespread anger among the oppressed. Strong action needed to be taken but it had to be disciplined and not spill over into mayhem that could undermine all gains made thus far. All of Reg's leadership skills had to come to the fore at this point in time along with that of the collective of leaders in the ILC.

On my own return to South Africa in September 1990, when I went to report to the Western Cape ANC Office in Athlone, I was lucky to meet Reg

September, who quietly indicated that it was not safe to talk in the ANC office and in front of the people there. He quickly ushered me out into the street, and we walked up and down a few blocks, talking. As we walked, he would wave to someone across the street or walking in a different direction, giving various signals. I said to Reg, 'it seems like you have got to know lots of people in the neighbourhood'. He explained that one could trust nobody, not even in the office. The regime had people tailing all of us, and even as we were walking and talking, we were being observed. No, he didn't know these passers-by, but he was signalling to any observer that he was among friends and not on his own.

What Reg was using was all the tactics we had been taught about conducting secret work. He had been greeting imaginary people, to give the impression that we had friends around us. This was the atmosphere in those first months back in South Africa. There was a degree of paranoia but there was a huge amount of justifiable caution that was required. Reg welcomed me back and opened up about the scenario that I would need to expect now that I returned. He explained that you could not simply take UDF and MDM people at face value as those structures had been highly infiltrated and even when that was not the case there were just so many naive untrained people who could easily get one into troubled waters. He cautioned me to behave as though, to a degree, we were still underground and be especially cautious in ANC offices. Just like the UDF-MDM structures were infiltrated so too now had the ANC branches and offices also been infiltrated.

Reg also said that I should not be surprised at the lukewarm reception that I was given at the ANC office as there was a lot of hostility to exiles returning, which was part of the enemy's mischief to create divisions. The letter given to me by Mendi Msimang introducing me to the local ANC office for integration into its work, he said, would carry no meaning. He

explained that there was a feeding frenzy of jostling for positions in ANC structures and it was doing no good to the movement. If you were perceived to be connected to the right people, you would be wined and dined by the most unprogressive types and if you were perceived to be competition you would be iced out. The worst behaviour could be seen at work. At that stage there were few that one could trust. Return from exile was a very lonely experience unless one could offer advancement to opportunists.

Reg advised me to keep my head down and be alert. He said I should join a branch, observe more than I spoke, and quietly help to steer people while developing a network of trustworthy comrades. I was told not to expect much by way of resettlement assistance. He explained that the movement had made many big mistakes in the way we returned and immediately started creating structures in a rush. He was part of the Interim Leadership Group and was only just beginning to find his feet. Even as a National Executive member of the ANC he was feeling like he was reeling and had to work hard to keep his finger on the pulse. Reg was appalled by how many people, both returning exiles and people who operated internally, in a mad frenzy, were embellishing their personal histories and trading on lies in naked opportunism.

Reg suggested that I stick close to Ray Alexander Simons and that she would guide me on what I would need to do now that I was back. His advice was to remain out of the limelight and take a semi-clandestine approach. He also advised that I try to monitor the arena of Coloured engagement in and attitudes towards the movement. He asked for feedback in terms of how Coloured people viewed their own aspirations as part of liberation. He also suggested that I find work within the NGO sector or the trades union sector and said that he and Ray would give me references and guidance. At a personal level he advised that the repatriation structures were giving people

poor advice and that I should take my son Dylan and approach the principal of Trafalgar High School, his old alma mater, to explain that he still did not have basic literacy, although of high school age, as a result of moving about so frequently in exile. It was the best advice that I received.

The year 1994 was a watershed year for Reg September. Having been at the forefront of the struggle, he could now, 60 years after his teenage years, vote for the first time and stand as a candidate for Parliament. In this year he was elected as a Member of Parliament and a member of the Constitutional Assembly. Reg literally beamed with pride, achievement and pleasure at a life well spent. Memories came flooding back, and he exulted in the vision and dream of a democratic South Africa where, regardless of notions of race, colour, ethnicity and class, every citizen now could participate in law-making and holding government accountable.

Reg September became the finest of public representatives, working round the clock, both in Parliament and at his assigned Constituency Office. He made a point of speaking at schools, in urban and rural community halls, at trade union meetings and everywhere that ordinary working-class folk gathered. He specifically went to listen to people and gauge the problems and needs that had to be championed by public representatives. He was a very good listener.

In addition to taking part in purging legislation that was based on racism, Apartheid, and colonialism, creating new facilitative laws, and drafting the new constitution, Reg also developed his own portfolio to champion. One of the most important elements that he chose to champion was the environment. Having been so long in exile, part of the “home” that preoccupied Reg’s mind was the sea so cherished by his father, the mountains, the rivers, the wildlife. He loved the flora and fauna and understood how important the planet was to human well-being. He also had

a great love for dogs and having a dog by his side to love was part of hearth and home.

Reg worried about the plunder of the sea and the pollution caused by the thoughtless exploitation of South Africa's mineral wealth by mines and factories, which not only caused our people to be sick, but also contaminated our scarce water resources and our seas. He was horrified at the criminal poaching of wildlife, specifically, the hacking off of elephant tusks and rhino horns. He was deeply saddened that so many creatures which were abundant in his youth could no longer be seen. He also saw the need for clean renewable energy, greater safety in workplaces and less use of toxic and dangerous substances.

Another issue that concerned Reg as a public representative was mental healthcare. He believed that the people's mental wellbeing was deteriorating and that this was linked to the broader concept of environmentalism. He was concerned about issues of home environments and the changing face of built environments, which he felt were toxic. He was further determined to tackle substance abuse and gang formation. Right at the top of his list of concerns was that people required homes and that shantytowns needed to be a thing of the past. Lack of piped water, electricity, sewerage and refuse removal he believed had to top the list of transformation. A built environment where there was community centres, adequate schools offering quality education that would lead to acquiring quality jobs, sports fields, libraries and so on was what he yearned to be part of ushering in to a new South Africa.

Reg was further highly conscious of other products of our colonial and Apartheid history, such as foetal alcohol syndrome as a result of the 'dop' system (tot system – supplementing workers' meagre salaries with alcohol), and generationally transmitted trauma as a result of over three centuries of wars, torture, and slavery.

The wellbeing of people and planet was the mainstay of Reg September's time as a member of parliament. He put his all into his public service, showing the servant leadership that he had always preached – and practised.

Reg was, no sleepy MP just warming a bench to get a handsome income. He was determined to squeeze as much time out of the 24-hour day as possible to cover all the causes that he felt needed to be championed. A huge amount of his time was once again also spent on the issue of building African consciousness among Coloured people. He pushed young people to be socially and politically engaged. He promoted the idea that education for liberation was of the utmost importance and that the youth had to take advantage of the new opportunities that liberation offered. He encouraged young people to free their minds of racist conditioning under Apartheid and understand that Africans being divided into Coloured and Black served nobody's interests but that of white supremacy. He spent an enormous amount of time encouraging people to shake off “divide and rule” manipulation. In many ways Reg was shocked at how the regime had successfully fostered divisions between those they called “Black” and those they called “Coloured” or “Bruin” over the Apartheid years.

Reg September did not just talk about these issues. He engaged tirelessly in educating Coloured people about our beautiful tapestry heritage and multi-ethnic tributaries. He unpacked the many strands of our African and Asian ancestry and culture that were rooted in slavery, indentured labour, and migrant labour. Reg called on Coloured people to celebrate all of this with pride. He did a lot of cajoling of the Coloured people who were successful in business, academia, and the professions to get up out of their comfort zones and show leadership in communities and work for the transformation of their people's lives. He urged them relentlessly to give

back, and to use their gift and privilege of articulation to engage in agency, advocacy, and role-modelling.

In the course of doing this, Reg would monitor various initiatives that were heritage based and that were popping up in the Coloured community. The December First Movement was an example. He also monitored letters to the newspapers, articles in newspapers and utterances by politicians, academics, and heritage activists. He started think tanks focused on the exploration of roots among the Coloured intelligentsia. In doing this work he pulled key personalities into a support group whom he could rely on.

On Africa Day 2002 Reg launched the Roots & Visions Forum to formalise this element of his work. The forum was tasked with engaging a broad audience from all the Coloured communities who wished to contribute freely to the process of exploring ways to celebrate pride in our African heritage. It also was tasked with promoting cooperation with others on our continent in building new partnerships for African development. The first meeting, with Reg September as convener, was held at the University of the Western Cape. The Vice Chancellor, Professor Brian O’Connell, was the chairperson and the theme of the assembly was “Being Coloured in the New South Africa – What are the Challenges?”

Reg set the tone for this important assembly by laying out his concerns, and highlighting the many great Coloured leaders that he had known in his lifetime who had contributed so much, including laying down their lives in the struggle. He was particularly appealing to the Coloured youth to get beyond the flawed arguments of the older people that were still marking time, marching on the spot, and not going forward, quibbling as to whether Coloured people exist or not, or whether there was a “Coloured Conundrum” or not. He called for people to be positive as Africans of creole heritage and to make that work for them. He urged them to use their talents

to proudly project both their African image and the sub-culture of Cape Khoe, Korana, Griqua, Nama, San, Camissa or however they wished to project it. He said they should make it work for themselves, for South Africa and for Africa – re-discover African brotherhood and sisterhood. This is how Reg September put it at the First Assembly of the Roots & Visions Forum:

My contribution is not an attempt to present an academic argument, but rather to share some frank thoughts and ideas that I think need to be considered. I do not propose a view of being separatist in any way, but I do believe our Coloured communities have their own circumstances and characteristics and I hope that we can devote attention to some problems faced and at least lay some foundations for doing so.

Coloured people are dealing with a painful past, “boxed-in” as it were, by past restrictions, colonialism, and Apartheid, isolated, misused, and denigrated in the process of being allocated the role of some kind of “semi-privileged” in a degraded South African scenario. This creates marginalisation and discrimination for Coloured communities. Even United Nations studies have brought this to the attention of government. Our own social worker professionals tell us this every day. The task of confronting these legacies still lies with us. The extent to which so many of our people have a distinct preference for remembering the tiny bit of our pale-faced origins at the expense of what we consider to be second rate – our much stronger African roots – must be of concern to all of us. So long as we’re in a state of denial of three quarters of our ancestry and culture, or in some cases half or quarter if you like – so long will we fail to walk tall as a community, and continue to feel inferior.

Present day roles played out by various strands of our communities are the result of the status here explained.

In having our discussions, we pay tribute to such families as Abdurahman, Gool, La Guma, Combrink, Gomas, Kies, February, Reeve, Rahiem, and Dulcie

September, who challenged what I see now so graphically described by her as ethnographic engineering. We can go on and still omit an army of names of those who played a role in trying to change the course of history.

The hybrid position which I, or we Coloured people occupy, in no way represents a degraded position. On the contrary, it is precisely the borrowing, the mixing of cross-continent cultures which enhances the wealth of any culture. It is therefore surprising just how often we have heard it said, 'But we have no culture of our own.' Think of how often it is said even by people close to us. What motivates people to say this?

We can understand the extent to which the feelings of degradation, or poor self-esteem, feelings of being marginalised, can destroy the morale of communities such as ours. The extent of social inertia, gangsterism, drugs and liquor abuse, and the prevalence of TB are without doubt the direct result of poverty, marginalisation, and a lack of a positive self-image. As someone who is well known to many of us once said – 'We have been accustomed to playing on the D Field.'

To turn this inheritance around is not going to be quick or easy. But we cannot depend on government on its own, nor on anybody else to do it for us. If we are to be motivated to start building our communities, let us consider doing a skills audit, a resources study and putting our shoulders to the wheel. Let's do it for ourselves. Any civic organisations can come together in such undertakings. Imagine what a positive effect such a movement can have in terms of building self-worth and empowerment of our people, and what a significant difference it can make to our lives.

But we cannot achieve prosperity in isolation. We are part of a bigger African community in South Africa. We need to draw government into partnership with us. We are also part of Africa; perhaps somewhat more privileged than most on the continent, but still part of a continent which has been colonized and plundered

for centuries. This means that we should recognise our neighbours; recognize the continent as a key role-player in the struggle for sustainable development, the struggle for peace and economic progress. It is a bridge which needs to be crossed on the road to taking pride in our place as Africans.

How can we play our part in reversing the legacy of non-recognition of our rich origins, by taking pride in all elements of our heritage, African, Indian, Southeast Asian, Chinese as well as that element that is European – our multi-continent heritage – the dignity and exceptional wealth that lies in the process of creolisation in our African-creole heritage.

Unfortunately for South Africa we remain unrecognised as an African people – and only we can change this and negative perceptions of and about ourselves. There are many from within our ranks that give us an inkling of the extravagant talent that lies locked within our community – writers, artists, musicians, business people, academics, politicians, sportspeople, – some who are here – look around you and you will see them. Let me mention just one young woman, Dayshun Daysel who at the moment is climbing snow-capped peaks in South America in preparation for an attempt to climb Everest next year. Let us harness the energy of our people, and climb our Everests here at home.

Coloured people should not have a separatist vision but must rather embrace their African pride and participate fully in development both within South Africa and on our continent. The Coloured community has its own problems due to being exploited by Apartheid. There is a need to confront and deal with the legacies of Apartheid and its impact on Coloured communities as a whole. Coloured people must develop pride in their Africaness and acknowledge and claim their roots. There is no such thing as a pure race and the intermixing of white people must also be acknowledged. The Coloured communities should organise themselves and develop their own African creole culture. But they cannot develop prosperity in isolation. We have to develop strategic partnerships with all the diverse African

communities here at home and throughout Africa. There is a wealth of talent and people with skills to be found in the Coloured communities who are able to lead the Coloured communities to achieve prosperity.

Reverend Lionel Louw, one of the speakers, gave the following input: Pre-1994 a significant number of Coloured people identified with Black Consciousness or the idea that all people of colour, without regard to Apartheid silos should stand united as one oppressed people. Post 1994 less people within the Coloured communities embraced this way of thinking and began to develop “Coloured Consciousness”. The factors to consider in evaluating why this has occurred include Affirmative Action where the perception is that opportunities are reserved only for those defined by Apartheid’s ethnicised version of the term “Blacks” or “Black Africans”. It was also felt that education opportunities and bursaries are awarded to those ethnically classified as “Blacks” while those classified as Coloured had their needs ignored. The concept of “political correctness” dominated where it was considered that the focus for advancement should only be on those classified as “Blacks” to the exclusion of Coloureds. The Coloured working class in particular are feeling more and more marginalised post 1994. There is no popular concept of being Coloured and there is no sense of pride in being Coloured. Indeed, there are even feelings of shame at being Coloured. There is therefore no sense of belonging and strong feelings of being left out. A systematic effort must be made to break down the barriers that divide those classified as Black and those classified as Coloured. The capacity to be found in the Coloured communities is immense and for this reason the Coloured communities can make a significant contribution to transformation. Coloured people need to be embraced as Africans and all other Africans need to embrace Coloureds as fellow Africans. Divisions must be overcome.

Christa van Louw dealt with the issue of language and its role in defining communities:

Since language was used to enslave people, it must be used to achieve freedom. Strategic support must therefore be given to multilingualism. There is a clear link between language and class relations. We need to avoid moving towards entrenching and reviving ethnicism and there are strong signs that this is emerging because Apartheid frameworks are still being used in the new South Africa. “Afrikaans” is a prominent language among Coloureds, and it therefore should be redefined (Afrikaaps) for Coloured people to be able to claim ownership. Historically “Afrikaans” was born among slaves and the Khoe.

Pallo Jordan of the ANC focused on socio-political aspects: Coloured is an imposed identity and is a political category created to define the residue of race categorisation. It can be traced as an act of social engineering, to political paradigm shifts or moments in time manipulated by colonial administrators. It was important for Coloured people to appropriate and assert their Africaness. This is more important than anything else when it comes to liberation and advancement of Coloured people. Coloured people have been discouraged from acknowledging their Africaness by an internalised and institutionalised belief in being this categorised Coloured being, rather than African. Only Coloured people themselves can make the giant leap required of asserting their Africaness. Nobody is going to do this for you. You must do it for yourself, you must claim your African identity yourselves. Your challenge is how you self-identify.

Soli Philander, a prominent and popular figure in the entertainment arena, made the following point and was visibly angered:

The issue of whether or not there is a Coloured identity is a non-issue among the vast majority of ordinary folk on the ground. It was only the

intellectuals in the community who made a big drama out of Coloured identity. This is not a problem. Wake up. The issue is simply that it is a huge almost impossible leap from being just an old Coloured, to being an emancipated, evolved, and free person. People weren't suddenly new South Africans. They were simply ordinary people getting on with their lives with their minds focussed on the daily grind. The real issues are how do we get Coloured people to stop complaining and moaning and playing the victim. We need to lose the victim stance. We need to assert ourselves and also what we see as our identities forged over 350 years at the Cape. Don't tell me that we don't have a culture and a common history of facing adversity and rising up against that adversity. Please!

There was a great amount of participation from the floor. This included the emphasis on the need for coloured people to stop playing the victim and to see being Coloured, or whatever we want to call ourselves, as being positive.

Reg was very happy at getting people talking like this as he saw that we need to break down barriers and educate our communities and all South Africans about our ancestry and diverse cultural heritage. He was happy to see the diversity of views and analysis as attendants argued that we must achieve consensus on a vision for ourselves and our advancement.

Professor Brian O'Connell, as chairperson of the assembly, rounded off the discussions and emphasised that there is a continuing need to develop rational processes through which coloured communities can be transformed:

This Forum was a space for people who wanted to talk about the issues faced by Coloured people. It was a space for adults who were free to participate if they wanted to. There is most definitely a need for Coloured people to come together and be part of such discussions as took place today.

We have dealt with only the tip of the iceberg. Today should be seen as a start in addressing an important gap in South African discourse.

For Reg September this Africa Day Roots & Visions Assembly of Coloured thought-leaders was a great step forward in tackling the “Coloured Question” in the context of the “National Question” and “Pan-African Vision”. It has been unique as an event since the unbanning of the ANC where the “National Question” was honestly examined in discourse of this type. Over the next few years, while he still could find the energy within himself, Reg put his all into cultivating an interest in the Roots & Visions Forum and more of these meetings and seminars were held. Reg believed that Coloured liberation required the building of African Consciousness – pride in African heritage and greater engagement by coloured people in the political and development arena in South Africa, in the African Union and in the world. He believed that everything hinged on healing the terrible rifts between coloured Africans and other Africans fostered by Apartheid and colonialism and its tactics of “divide and rule”.

Reg recognised that access to information would empower Coloured people and other Africans to come together, and this information – hidden histories, had been suppressed. He wanted Roots & Visions to bridge the information gap by exposing South Africans to a deeper and fuller understanding of San and Khoe history. He wanted the stories of the San, Nama, Damara, Korana, Griqua, Olam Afrikaners and Cape Khoe to be unpacked. Their relationship with other Africans who also shared San and Khoe ancestry, like the Xhosa, Gqunukhwebe, Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, Venda and so on also needed to be described and exposed. He wanted Roots & Visions particularly to give a better and fuller account of African-Asian slavery, of forced migrations of Non-Europeans, and also of the rebel-Europeans in our heritage.

Reg said ignorance and distorted stories about this past, kept our people mentally enslaved. Across Africa and its islands, in every port city, there are Coloured people – African creole peoples, who are not labelled Coloured, and are fully accepted as African, each with their own sub-identity that proudly proclaims their roots. Why we had to handle this differently here in South Africa was unfathomable to Reg. He said that the colonists and Apartheid ideologues had deeply wounded us. He also decried those narrow nationalists in the ANC who were chauvinistic about the Apartheid-created “Black” ethnic silo and stated that they were responsible for continuing to inflict this pain on Coloured people. He sincerely hoped that we could get past this in his lifetime.

Reg associated the Roots & Visions project with other initiatives like the District Six Museum, the Parliamentary Millennium Project, the Slave Lodge Museum Project, the Ties that Bind Us Project and the Popular Memory Project, among others.

A few months after the first assembly of the Roots & Visions Forum, Reg spoke at a cultural gathering at the historic Castle of Good Hope. For the best part of 200 years, it had been the seat of colonial government and during the Apartheid era it was a base of the SADF military administration. It is pertinent here to recall Reg September’s speech at that gathering as he captures in one speech what I would call Reg’s life song, or his September Moment.

Reg September was a true working-class hero of the struggle. He was self-educated and a full-time cadre from his late teens. He did not have the academic degrees that many of the other leaders had, nor did he come from a pedigree struggle family, but was in a class of his own. He had an amazing track record as a revolutionary leader with a profound well of acumen and wisdom that few could match. He spoke a working-man’s language rather

than highfalutin political lingo, and was a humble gentleman, a servant leader, deeply inspired by his ancestral continuum rooted in slavery. Over the more than 30 years that I knew him and in the paper trail that goes way back to his youth one cannot miss this consistency and continuity – a very rare thing in politics. He taught by telling stories and they were deeply personal and emotional stories that spoke to the soul. He spoke to one, not at one, as many tend to do in politics.

On that Heritage Day Reg said: *Recently a group of 80 people met, hosted by Professor Brian O’Connell, rector of the University of the Western Cape. Trevor Oostermyk described the meeting, which met under the banner of Roots & Visions, as a Forum – and we will see it as a Forum in the future. All of us gathered that day would like to take our place in this new developing society.*

Today is an outflow of that meeting, and we are pleased to join hands with Peter Voges of the Western Cape Theatre Project on this Heritage Day celebration.

As we gather here, in this historic building, one cannot but help think of the cruelty to which so many of our forefathers and mothers were subjected. And under what conditions they were brought here. I have walked the beaches of Tanzania and Zanzibar, and the streets of Madagascar, places from which the enslaved, among them our ancestors, were exported. So, like me, many must wonder about our origins.

And it is with a deep sense of sadness that one has to wonder if it was your own forefather, who as a stone-mason, could have built his own place of incarceration as he laboured on this structure in which we stand.

I believe one of my forefathers was such a stone-mason. Building is in my family. Both my father and I have been in this trade. The name September, like all the other surnames which are months of the year, we know were given to the

enslaved upon their arrival or on their birth, by the slave-owners – the masters. The original names were blotted out by their purchasers.

And what of our women? We now know of Sarah Baartman, to whom we have been able to restore dignity. But what of the injustices suffered by our other mothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters?

These men and women certainly did not accept it all without resistance. There is just so much we all need to know about our own history and about our origins. We ask if our origin is Khoe, San, Griqua, Malay or Xhosa, or were they captured in what is today known as Tanzania, Mozambique, or Madagascar to become slaves here at the Cape?

Some identify the white side more easily or readily, but the black has so often been erased. Very few of us are in the fortunate position of Peter Voges, whose father, a German, registered himself as Coloured when faced by a population registration form. We can salute such non-conformism, self-respect, and courage.

Tariq Mellet has reminded me that this year, one hundred years ago, the African People's Organisation, known as the APO, was established by a number of people, many of whom were sons and daughters of slaves. 'Not such ancient history,' as my wife Melissa would say.

We bow our heads in honour of those men and women who, led by Dr Abdurahman and Matthew Fredericks for so many years, demanded equal citizenship rights. They could not succeed in the face of those who were determined to hold onto their place of power and privilege.

That is, until such time that the old order had come to terms with the forces of change and a new constitution had to be evolved allowing for all people, irrespective of colour, to participate in government at all levels.

The diverse range of our cultures is obviously ever so rich, a heritage of which we can be ever so proud. Few other cities in the world can match our rich creolisation. This despite the stigma of "impurity" which colonialism inflicted on

us, regarding whiteness as so pure and superior; forgetting that our blood has also mingled with theirs.

In the course of time and struggle we have destroyed the myth of racial purity. In fact, there is no such thing as a pure racial group, and increasingly both white and black compatriots can acknowledge this truth as they talk about their own ancestry. This long overdue recognition of our intermixture should play a part in facilitating us to achieve our full nationhood as South Africans. The ties that bind us could be stronger than those things that keep us apart.

We need to understand that unless and until we face this challenge, our offspring will not realise the full potential of participation in the struggle to build a new South Africa and to engage in African Renaissance. Today we see a bigger canvas and the peoples of Africa are realising more and more our interdependence. If your neighbour is struck by poverty, hunger, ignorance, and diseases you will not prosper. Peace will struggle to survive.

We all have different skills and resources and there is the crying need for these to be used effectively for our mutual benefit. Failure to engage in this process has allowed others to plunder and take advantage of our divisions.

We are faced with the responsibility of drawing our people into skills training; of honestly dealing with each other in a respectful and caring way; and presenting our people with a future of hope. It is heart-breaking when our people in the common grip of poverty, from two African communities, one labelled Black and the other Coloured, with minor social and cultural differences, living on two sides of the same road, turn on each other in competition for resources. This happens while others privileged in our society live in luxury with an over-abundance of resources and facilities.

We have to build the unity among those previously oppressed and commonly dispossessed. On the ashes of the old regime, we have no alternative but to build this new culture of African Consciousness for development and the solidarity of

the poor who must be empowered to overcome the legacy of dispossession. But we must keep in mind that we cannot have a sense of a good future, without claiming pride in our past and striving for unity across the divisions that were created to subjugate us.

A year after its first assembly at UWC, the Roots & Visions Forum followed up with a second assembly exploring the Coloured dimension in expressing African Pride. Once again Reg personally coordinated this initiative and Prof. Brian O'Connell again acted as chairperson. I was the facilitator of the assembly and Zubeida Jaffer, who was a political analyst with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, was one of the speakers. Other speakers included Lincoln Bernado, the Chairperson of the Arts and Culture Resource Centre at Artscape, and Professor Henry Jatti Bredekamp, the CEO of Iziko Museums.

Reg September set the tone again with some thought-provoking questions: *Why are issues of personal and group identity so elusive and yet so important? How do we excite people about finding out about their roots and what does this give them? How might the insights gained from such exploration affect the paths that individuals and communities take into the future? Perhaps if we develop a practical roadmap that helps to establish who we are, this might allow us to be more positive about a range of contributions we can make to society? Apartheid indoctrination and social constructs will not go away magically. Indoctrination needs to be undone and social constructions need to be deconstructed. What are the tools that we need and what are the goals that we set to measure the achievement of decolonisation of the mind?*

The Roots & Visions Forum initiative builds on a long line of leadership initiatives that go back to leaders in the African People's Organisation, the National Liberation League, the South African Coloured People's Congress, the National Liberation Movement led by the ANC and many other political

initiatives such as, more recently, the United Democratic Front and Mass Democratic Movement, by wanting to connect with Coloured youth so as to deal with their questions and build hope and confidence. We want to assist in exploring our roots and helping to realise visions.

Prof. Brian O'Connell said that the Roots & Visions Forum wanted to look at the sense of connectedness to Africa of the Coloured or African creole community in South Africa:

We want to look at Coloured connectedness to Africa, African history, African knowledge, and to being African. We need a stronger engagement with Africa's efforts to impact on the world. We have a rich tapestry of creole heritage which includes a deep African heritage of which we are proud. We want to celebrate this heritage with all other African brothers and sisters in South Africa. Both our young and our old have been denied full knowledge of our rich past. A degree of disconnectedness and polarisation has descended on the Coloured communities over the last decade, and we wish to play a role in stimulating people to engage positively with the transformation process. We share a concern that fewer Coloured young people are entering higher education, while despondency and cynicism about the public service and the political process abound among Coloured youth. It is vitally important to connect with Coloured youth in a dynamic way so as to deal with their questions and to build hope and confidence.

Patric Tariq Mellet added this perspective: If we recognise that identity flows from the vision people have of themselves, then the challenge that Coloured communities and individuals face is to establish what it is that is our vision. How do we assist others to explore their multiple identities, to find their individual vision, to contribute to South African and global renewal? This entails a move away from preoccupations with a silo-identity,

where identity resided in a singular vertical silo that could not be linked horizontally with other identities in a hugely diverse country.

The political or ideological pressure in South Africa has always been on individuals and societies to come up with one single defining identity based on ethnicity, colour, race, religion, and language. The reality is that human beings are wired to collect identities from the day we are born until the day we die. We are also wired to discard identities. Of the many identities we have at any one time, the strongest is what we do with our lives and how we shape ourselves. Our community was labelled and defined as Coloured in 1904, in preparation for the social construct of the Union of South Africa. It had over 195 tributaries and was simply an umbrella term for many identities forcibly assimilated into one, in what constitutes a crime against humanity. We are challenged to rediscover that the dominant cement that held us together in a positive way was our Africaness - our Camissa African identity.

Much could be done in the fields of arts and culture, media, and tourism to bring our heritage to life, and so document and celebrate people's African pride. Compelling, creative methods are needed to highlight the nation's rich and diverse heritage by popularising history in schools, in the malls, and in print and broadcast media. We must promote new historical narratives that challenge the dishonest and distorted colonial narratives. The more of us who proudly say I am an African, or I am an African of Camissa or creole heritage, the more of a movement there will be.

Lincoln Bernado argued that the challenge was to get Coloured communities to buy into the African Renaissance as a project:

We need to attempt to identify some of the reasons behind the apparent lack of enthusiasm for such ventures as the African Renaissance. If arts and culture were utilised to their full potential, they could become a powerful tool of engagement on a mass scale. Not everyone can sit through long and

meandering debates. Art, film, radio and TV, theatre, music, and dance communicate ideas much more powerfully. The African Renaissance project provided communities in the Western Cape and Northern Cape with the opportunity to redefine their cultural identity outside the mould cast during the Apartheid and colonial eras (for example, the Riëldans movement). The democratic order has provided us with the space to unshackle our culture from the painful past. Yet few of our people seem to have grasped the opportunity.

For us to survive and thrive as a people, we need to ensure that we form alliances with our natural allies and that we embrace our African roots with the same passion with which we fought the Apartheid regime. Make no mistake – we are Africans.

What is necessary is a concerted effort to produce local films, theatre, music, and dance that reflect indigenous and slave memories. The role played by Coloured people in the quest to liberate South Africa over the last 150 years needs to be recognised. Knowledge about this history of resistance would help instil a sense of pride within the Coloured communities too.

Iziko Museums CEO, Dr Henry Jatti Bredekamp, challenged the stereotyping of Coloured people by saying that our preoccupation should not be the “othered” view of who we are.

What we are is not so much what people say we are, it is how we see ourselves in terms of our vision of the future. This raises the complex issue of Coloured identities. However, members of these communities have increasingly come to accept that they had multiple identities or a variety of identities and these differed according to social and cultural context. How do these identities fit with the metaphor of “Rainbow Nation”? Should we even consider this “metaphor”? In our own context we ask ourselves how South African are we? We see our South African-ness still too much in

ethnic terms. My vision is a holistic one in a broader South African context, and in an even broader African context.

What appeals to me about the Roots & Visions Forum is that there is a vision of an African identity. It is about engaging one another as being part of South Africa and Africa.

Museums were an excellent way to empower and inspire all people to celebrate and respect our diverse heritage in South Africa as Africans. The best way for Coloured people to identify with being African is for them to get a pre-colonial idea about our past.

Zubeida Jaffer raised two very important points most succinctly. First, the profile of these strategic conversations in the public media was vital, so that broader audiences would be engaged. She also said that we could not put our heads in the sand and refuse to see the great tension that existed between those Africans classified as blacks and those classified as Coloureds.

In any one day, a huge amount of information is processed by various media outlets, all competing for the very limited space and time slots. To successfully engage the media on issues of identity these would have to be engagingly packaged in an unusual, interesting, and newsworthy format – and in a manner that illustrates broader issues.

It is necessary too that we address the reality that there is quite a lot of tension between Black and Coloured communities in some areas. We need to see whether the Forum has a particular view of identity before we can put out a message to the media. There are no quick solutions.

There were also many other contributions from the floor. Many of the comments affirmed the approach that Reg September took – basically, that the Coloured intelligentsia kept problematising and talking of a “Coloured Conundrum”. There were too many attempts to rigidly define identity in terms of homogeneity, which does not exist in any of South Africa’s group

silos, yet Coloured intelligentsia continued to harp on about the non-homogeneity of Coloureds, which would allegedly mean that Coloureds do not exist.

Reg found the preoccupation of trying to frame an “only legitimate identity” as having to be ethnic, race, colour, culture, and language uniformity when it comes to Coloured people by middle-class academia highly frustrating. He believed that we should be showing leadership and positivity and that in building African Consciousness and in dealing with all the contradictions thrown up by ‘divide and rule’ manipulation we could rise above the created “Coloured Conundrum”. The imperative of reclaiming our African identities and all our indigenous sub-cultures, flowing from African and Asian slavery, indentured labour, and other migrations, was the answer that stared us in the face.

By establishing the Roots & Visions Forum and regularly holding dialogue assemblies tackling the subject of re-discovering our African identity as an unrecognised African people, Reg September continued his consistent life project of the liberation of Coloured communities. Indeed, this was an even greater achievement than the formation of the South African Coloured People’s Congress. Reg in his old age was able to bring broader sections of people together and to get people discussing a different and more real range of political issues. People could be open and honest and there were no pseudo ideological corners in the discourse. There were many affirming moments, much deserved by Reg for all that he had ploughed into the political arena.

Through establishing the Forum Reg realised his own vision articulated during the bleak exile years. Reg September had always said that when it came to navigating our way through terminology, we should wait until we had achieved a non-racial democracy. Then through talking to each other

and sounding out our communities we would get the answers. The Forum that he created did just this. It started and promoted what can be called strategic conversations, and these strategic conversations were providing answers.

In 2006, four years after the Roots & Visions Forum was first established, Reg had a discussion with Reuben September of Telkom, Dan Badenhorst of MacRobert Inc, Fred Robertson of COMLIFE, Prof. Brian O’Connell of UWC, the Reverend Michael Weeder, his wife Melissa and I about establishing the Trust and a physical footprint for it at the Castle of Good Hope – a Centre for the Study of Slavery in South Africa and its Legacy. He also opened up discussions with the Ministry of Arts and Culture about support for this project.

Over the next few years Reg was very excited and hopeful that this would be a lasting legacy for his life’s work. Alas the Trust was unable to raise the financial support, and the support that Reg had hoped would come from the Department of Arts and Culture never materialised, nor did the Castle of Good Hope finally offer the premises. By this time Reg’s age and poor health had caught up with him and he could not be as active anymore. Sadly, the Trust and the project were shelved.

By 2021, eight years after Reg’s passing a visionary project was established in fulfilment of his dream. A museum and place of memory was established at the Castle on the ‘Peopling of the Cape’ that highlights the 195 tributaries from Africa, Asia and the Diaspora across the world that underpins the African creole heritage in South Africa as a result of slavery. The Camissa Museum at the Castle of Good Hope and the online Camissa Museum has gone a long way towards realising Reg September’s vision and mission in life. The rallying focus on Camissa African identity as a positive

way of expressing ancestral-cultural heritage of those classified as ‘Coloured’ has already radically refocused identity discourse.

Reg September had left these challenges to the youth of South Africa to take forward. He also left the last part of his life’s work for youth to take forward – Reclaiming of African identity and all its wonderful sub-cultural identities within communities classified as Coloured. What a legacy and what challenges to leave for future generations!

Right through to his retirement years from being a Member of Parliament, Reg continued to take care of people and fight for the rights of individuals and groups. He continued to highlight the gains made after so many years of struggle, but he also continued to be an activist who deeply cared about the condition of his people and fought for action to be taken to roll back poverty and adverse conditions. Reg passed away in 2013 as a liberated African in the fullest sense.

It is very sad that when Reg passed away, the organisations to which he had dedicated his life – the ANC and SACP, did not appropriately give him the full recognition that he deserved. Sure, Reg was given a lacklustre provincial honours funeral and a memorial in Johannesburg and Cape Town. Pop stars are given much better than what was afforded Reg who deserved similar treatment to the most illustrious of liberation movement leaders. Frankly the ANC response, as noted earlier in this book by Stephanie Kemp, was appalling with no real consciousness as to the stature in ANC legacy of the man who had passed.

The highest national award that can be given in South Africa for recognition of achievement in the international arena by those who have served South Africa's interests is the Mapungubwe Award in platinum awarded for exceptional and unique achievements. It was awarded to the likes of FW de Klerk but not to Reg September who was one of the first two

who established the International Solidarity Committee in 1952 that led to the formation of the global Anti-Apartheid Movement, and who served as the longest Chief Representative of the ANC in London and worldwide. Worst still was that Reg September was only awarded the Luthuli Award, and not in gold, just in silver.

The highest award that the ANC has given to the outstanding leaders of the ANC, SA Indian Congress, Congress of Democrats, SA Congress of Trades Unions, the SA Communist Party and leading church figures – all leading contemporaries of Reg September is the Isithwalandwe Seaparankoe Award. Glaringly missing is recognition of the leading office-bearer of the SA Coloured People's Congress, its founder and driver, the General Secretary Reg September. It is so glaring as to be interpreted, deliberate or those handling these matters were just incompetent in carrying out the recognition process.

By 2013 the ANC top office-bearers were already showing little understanding or a distorted understanding of the history of the organisation and partner formations in the struggle. Coloured personalities and their stature as ANC leaders of similar standing to OR Tambo and Nelson Mandela were just airbrushed out of memory. With this lack of understanding and appreciation of past servant-leadership, the difference between “leadership” and simply being “office-bearers” in the present was also not understood. Cleverness also replaced wisdom, and this has resulted in a huge credibility gap between the ANC today and the people of South Africa.

This book in part is a means to right this great wrong when it comes to the memory of a humble, visionary, servant-leader. For many Reg September was the Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu of

Cape Town – our much-loved Uncle Reg. Perhaps one day the City of Cape Town will find the heart to honour him as much as they have done others.

Mark September, Reg's son, at his passing, perhaps gave the most profound brief statement about his father – “I wish that I had known my father better. I do however know these things about him. He was a good man. He was a man of principle. He dedicated most of his life, at no small cost, to the people of our country. He was loved and respected. Many of the best parts of me come from him. Our country and our world need more people like him”.

This book celebrating his life's journey was a labour of love and appreciation for the selfless man who had made the struggle his life. We would be much the poorer without this legacy. Reg September believed that the struggle is a continuum. *Vitoria e Certa... A luta Continua!*

CONCLUSION

Reg's later years

Here Melissa Steyn, Reg's spouse and companera concludes the story:

I was fortunate to be able to take up a Fulbright scholarship to study Intercultural Communication at Arizona State University between 1994 and 1996, the period immediately after South Africa's first democratic elections. While I was away, I learnt that my younger daughter, Anna, was in a relationship with a young man whose surname was September. I knew that this was a name that indicated slave heritage, and that it meant that she must be involved in an interracial relationship. This was no longer illegal as it had been in apartheid South Africa, giving the freedom to follow her heart. Of course, I was curious to meet her new love.

Upon my return in late 1996, I met Mark, her partner, and liked him very much. Before long, Reg and Hettie invited me to their home for a meal, along with Mark and Anna, Brian and Sonya Bunting, and some other guests. During the evening, it was clear that Reg and I responded to issues in a similar way. Sonya made a comment about an opera production that was showing at the Baxter Theatre, which I felt was Eurocentric. Reg backed me up. We found ourselves arguing on the same side of other issues. The dynamic established that night would later become our life together; we just were a team.

In the months that followed, we met socially as parents of the young couple once or twice more, but sadly, Hettie was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died shortly after diagnosis. In my heart, I felt sure that once he

had dealt with his grief, Reg would indicate an interest in me, and I was not wrong. A few months later I got a call from him. He had had a cataract operation and could not drive. There was a function hosting Fidel Castro at the Nederburg Estate and Dr Jaffett, the fellow parliamentarian with whom he had arranged a lift, was now unable to go.

He asked me, “Are you sure this isn’t this too radical for you?” It was typical of his care not to want to place me in an uncomfortable position, but I was more than delighted to have an opportunity to see Fidel Castro in person and hear him speak. It was an unforgettable evening, and it wasn’t long after that that he started calling on me at home.

For the longest time, I had had a conflicted relationship with my father’s political life and choices and had not wanted to be identified as his daughter wherever I could avoid it as would invariably lead to a situation where people would feel at liberty to deluge me with their views on his political worth — mostly condemnatory — whether they were from the political left and right.

I had no investment in defending my controversial father and would almost always end up feeling humiliated and even assaulted, my own person invisibilized and misrecognized. Reg, however, never failed to let me know how proud he was of my personal and political journey to become who I was and would delight in telling people that I was Marais Steyn’s daughter. One evening in the early months of our relationship, we attended a function at the Korean Consulate, where we encountered the well-known journalist, Barry Streek. Without a moment’s reflection or engaging me on my views, Barry felt he needed to instruct me on my father’s political misdirection. As usual, I felt cornered and humiliated by this and told Reg later how it had made me feel.

The way in which Reg responded to this incident was one of the first occasions on which I witnessed the way in which Reg exercised his power

and something that explained so much of his life. He wrote a polite, carefully worded, letter to Barry Streek, explaining that he had been insensitive, and counselling that he apologizes to me. A few days later I received a letter of apology from Barry Streek. Reg's solidarity was one of the most affirming things I had experienced, and it was also my first experience of how the sweetness and gentleness that was so endearing in Reg, should not be misconstrued. He was clear and firm on what was acceptable and tough when he saw the need to be.

Not having ever been in a relationship that encouraged my independence of mind and spirit, I had always found myself in trouble for expressing non-orthodox views. Another surprise for me, therefore, was how Reg admired women who were able to take a stand on an issue. Also, early into our relationship, we were at a dinner at the home of Colin and Margaret Legum, with Ben and Mary Turok as well as David and Sue Sonnenberg. I commented that it was a pity that after South Africa's creative process of CODESA, which had worked on the principle of consensus, we had simply adopted the Westminster model of parliament. This model assumes adversarial relations, even in the spatial layout of parliament, and operates on a principle of defending and winning "turf."

Ben Turok clearly thought the idea of reframing the assumptions on which parliament rested was a stretch too far, and told me "Dream on, my dear!" In the discussion that ensued, I glanced at Reg -- he was looking at me as if he was seeing me for the first time. My immediate thought was, "Oh, well, there goes another marriage!" When we talked later in the evening, though, he told me that it had been quite the opposite -- he had loved it that I was advancing my position so strongly. I saw this respect often, as when we would watch news and an African women was arguing strongly against an injustice, he would proudly comment, "She can fight!"

Such seemingly inconsequential incidents, and so many more like them, built a tone in our relationship that gave me a sense of freedom to be myself that was unlike anything I had experienced before. Reg was generous and unwavering in his affirmation of my being, and I always felt that it was in part temperamental, but also because his political belief in liberation was something deeply inculcated.

It often seemed to me that this combination of deep humanity and strong resolve is what drove Reg and explained the life he had led. Reg's love for his parents as a child was profoundly evident and his accounts of early memories were mostly recognitions of moments of politicization. He would often recount his outrage at the fact that his mother was so grateful for the bottles of Oros that Stuttaford had given for her stall at a church bazaar, at the time that he was attempting to disenfranchise the coloured people through the Stuttaford Servitude Bill.

What had affected him was that his mother did not appreciate how insulting the gesture was. Moments like these created an outrage that burnt deeply within him against the indignity that the apartheid system visited upon the people of his community and powered his activism, which he unassumingly described as "just doing the next thing that needed to happen." He had no time for self-aggrandising narratives. The work to overthrow the Apartheid system had to be done, sacrifices had to be made, and he did not see why it should be someone else who made the sacrifices and not him.

Ambition for position and status, he told me more than once, "messes up your mind," and was something that he disliked intensely in those of his comrades that succumbed to such temptation. I know that Madiba approached him about leading the ANC in Western Cape, but he felt strongly that it should be someone who had been in the country during the

years of mass mobilization, and that it would not be appropriate for him as a returned exile to occupy the position.

His good friend, Pete Smith, remembers the impression this unassuming demeanour made on him when they first met:

In the early summer of 1991, a friend from the neighbourhood asked if I could lend a recently returned ANC comrade who lived around the corner from him a particular wood working tool. So it was that one Sunday morning I arrived at this house in Crawford to the sound of classical music coming from a radio in the garage and I was confronted by this lean, grey-haired man in long pants and no shirt busy wood working. Reg September was the first ANC luminary I'd ever met, and he forever set in my mind the image of a South African freedom fighter. (Personal Communication)

I often observed how a person's attitude towards power, prestige and status would influence his judgement of the person, and he was unailing in passing the lesson on to younger comrades. Once in the new Athlone branch of the ANC that he was responsible for setting up, he came upon a young comrade in one of the offices sitting with his feet on his desk. Reg told him that "this is not the way things are done in the ANC" but the incident to him was a litmus test of the person's character. Reg was not surprised when later this MP was found guilty of having accepted a luxury car as bribe.

I admired this consistency, which he held right to his very last days. He remained totally committed to a modest lifestyle, as his years in the struggle and values of his communist convictions had inculcated in him. We bought the house in which we settled down in the Black River area, which was one of the first areas from which Coloured people had been forcefully removed. He had no desire to live in a more affluent area. He drove a Toyota Corolla and would be insulted by any suggestions that he should buy one of the luxury German brands.

Reg appreciated good workmanship and would always support local and small businesses. He especially prized well-made shoes, which he would examine with a skilled eye. He was not a spendthrift — we lived comfortably — but he abhorred any kind of display of wealth or behaviour that, as he put it, would “alienate him from the people.” I know he was offered shares in companies that he refused, as he did not want any conflict of interest with his ideological and political position. He was most comfortable supporting community-based and empowerment investments.

If Reg’s family name was unambiguously of slave origin; my family story originated at the same time in South Africa’s history. Douw Steyn arrived at the Cape in 1666. He was the chief mason of the Castle, which played its nefarious role as a bastion for the early Cape settlement. Douw married Maria Lozee, who was the daughter of Maria of Angola, a slave of Angolan origin. Despite this mixed ancestry, the family became resolutely white. I have often wondered about all the violence that must played out in people’s lives to enable the systematic forgetting of our early background. It appealed to Reg’s sense of irony that our marriage united these two diametrically opposed historical trajectories. He claimed it as an act of historical restitution that our union brought together the offspring of the slave-owning class and slaves. We wished a talented writer could trace the intersections of these two families from the first encounter through the generations of racial entanglement, segregation and often violence, to our marriage — and joked that it would be a South African *War and Peace*.

The chances of two people of such different generations (thirty years difference between us), backgrounds, and histories coming together must be miniscule, and one would think that the chances of happiness would be slim, but we went on to have sixteen wonderful years together. We laughed about our good fortune, given the unlikelihood of our match. One night, Reg was

in bed before me. I wanted to put out the bedroom light, and asked from the doorway, “Reg, are you ready to sleep or must I leave the light on? I can’t see if your eyes are closed; I don’t have my contact lenses in.” To which he replied, “Just speak a little louder—I can’t hear, I don’t have my hearing aids in.” We laughed at how that seemed symbolic of the achievement of finding each other at all in our later lives.

Our basic responses to people and issues were so deeply in sync that our marriage was harmonious. This was also largely because of Reg’s capacity for handling matters with so much sensitivity and tact. He had characteristic ways of speaking that always indicated carefulness, which I came to call *Reg Speak*. When he was in a discussion with someone and wanted to persuade them to a different perspective, for example, he would seldom outrightly contradict the person, but always acknowledge their view with “Having said that, . . .” before providing a different insight. It was disarming, allowing the other person to hear what he was saying without becoming defensive. He would adopt this tone even if he was taking on a person who was politically very far removed from him. Early in our relationship it sometimes took me a little while to realise I had been “scolded” as his criticism always felt so affirming!

Respectfulness underpinned so much of the way in which Reg handled things. It would have been so easy for me to feel that I was an appendage to his “real” life of struggle and exile, which of course included his long, if complicated, relationship with Hettie. In all the years we were together, Reg did not say anything demeaning or disrespectful about her, while at the same time, he made me feel that I was all he had ever wanted. The same applied politically.

While his time in exile was obviously where he made his longest contribution, he was totally present in rebuilding our society, and I always

felt a valued companion in this phase of his life. He said on a few occasions that the struggle had been to bring about the society we now making, and that he regarded the reconstruction and building of the new order as “what it had all been about.” Unfailingly, he would take notice of indications of change, and really savour them. He never stopped being heartened by young mixed couples, for example, or the changing demographics at graduations. I saw it as real “job satisfaction.” At the same time, he would resent contexts that were obviously not transforming. He would find it difficult to eat in restaurants, like the one we went to in Camps Bay one evening, where the customers were all white, and he disliked visiting areas, like Constantia, where he could see few signs of change. Invariably he would get lost in such places, which seemed to be a kind of protest.

Reg was in parliament for ten years in the democratic South Africa—serving on several committees, including Foreign Affairs. He was on the ANC parliamentary Ethics Committee. However, the committee work that was closest to his heart was the Environmental Committee, where he always paid particular attention to the fishing industry. His sense of familial connection to fishing was clear in his enduring love of Kalk Bay. This was his Soul Place. From time to time, he would need to visit the harbour and watch the boats come in and the fish being offloaded, buy a fresh snoek, and take it to the women who would gut and descale the fish on the quay. All of this would be accompanied by engagement with the local people and prolonged conversations on the fishing conditions. The greatest treat he could offer friends would be a fish curry, which he would spend hours preparing. It gave him deep joy.

A project that was very important to him involved securing housing for returned exiles. As an accountant, Pete Smith worked with him on this project, and recalls:

Reg was manning the new Athlone office of the ANC from its inception and was masterful at roping in people to help. In spite of his gentleness, he had a very persuasive manner, just through the look in his eye and the tone of his voice. One of the projects he soon got involved with was finding homes for returned ANC exiles, some of whom were living in desperate conditions. He located an ambitious housing development in Khayelitsha that had gone insolvent and with money he raised from various donors he formed the Sinethemba Community Trust Company which acquired twenty-one double-story houses on a large piece of land.

The houses needed completing and one valuable source of funding was the artist Gregoire Boonzaier whom had back in 1949 sponsored Reg's trip abroad. I was Reg's designated driver on several occasions when we visited Gregoire in Onrus near Hermanus. These visits would entail Reg and Gregoire having long conversations about the struggle, politics, the Spanish civil war, art, Russia, etc. while Mrs Boonzaier kept pouring tea and I kept nodding as if I was following the conversation. These visits resulted in Gregoire donating considerable amounts of money to the Trust.

The Sinethemba project went on for many years with most delays due to red tape that often appeared from the most unexpected sources. Eventually twenty-one exile families became owners of their own homes and with this closely knit community involved in much of the project decision making it was special getting to know these people and to witness the respect they had for 'Uncle Reg'. (Personal communication)

Reg's deepest self was always working on issues related to the community from which he came. He was highly aware of his positionality in all his thinking, including that he came from a relatively privileged group within the Coloured community. Once he retired as a member of parliament, which

was at 80, he redoubled his work on projects related to identity and awareness amongst the community.

Reg believed that the legacy of slavery still played a role in the psychological burden carried by the community, particularly in that a slave ancestry was construed as a legacy of shame, rather than pride at what people had come through and overcome. One of the first books he read after joining the local history society, a good source of literature on the early period at the Cape (the irony of its being called the Van Riebeeck society was not lost on him) recorded the court proceedings of the Cape Company. The account of a slave with his own surname, September van Boegies, affected him for long time. September had used medicinal skills from his home in Malaysia to treat the wounds of some escaped slaves who had been caught and brutally punished. For this he was sentenced to death by having the all the bones of his body broken from the toes upward. Reg felt the pain of this cruelty as if it was his own body; the incident was a vivid shorthand for all the suffering enslaved and oppressed people had endured, and it moved him to tears.

As part of the healing, he believed to be necessary, Reg was keen that the legacy of slavery should be talked about to break the silence about ancestry, other than European, that still tends to be perpetuated in the community. He hoped that the project, “Roots and Vision” would go some way towards realizing this reclamation of the dignity of people who had struggled for their freedom. His vision included claiming a section of the Castle at Cape Town as a home for documenting and celebrating the richness of the cultural trajectories that contributed to the people of the Cape. I still have the architectural plans he had drawn up for a section of a wing in the Castle. This act of “reclamation” appealed to his always mischievous sense of irony.

Although the initiative had some successes, he needed more resources, especially administrative backup, for the movement to really gain traction.

He would have been deeply gratified to see the fruition of this dream in the work of his beloved comrade, Tariq Mellet, and others in establishing the Camissa Museum at the castle. Equally, he would have been very moved by the fact that Tariq has produced this book, documenting the times and challenges he lived through.

In the time that we lived in Cape Town, Michael Weeder would come round every Friday evening for a whiskey with Reg. I loved this relationship: Reg, an atheist and communist; Michael, an Anglican priest, and later Dean of St George's Cathedral. The affection between them was obvious and was testimony to the lived belief in inclusiveness and their shared history of liberation struggle. Reg valued all our contributions to building a democratic, better society for all.

Even though he had been strongly opposed to the Unity Movement's politics, he believed that after democracy had been achieved, those battles should be regarded as historical and not stand in the way of working together. He was disappointed when we went to a function also attended by Helen Kies, the widow of Bennie Kies, and she refused to shake his hand and turned her back on him when he greeted her.

Only in his retirement was Reg able to work through many of the emotions he had had to repress to steel himself during the time of exile. He now grieved for his beloved parents, both of whom had died while he was away from South Africa and had been buried in his absence. He would recall that he had been told that in her dying days his mother had looked to the door repeatedly, hoping to see him come to her bedside. Such memories would make him reflect with heartache on the toll that his choices that prioritised the struggle and resulted in exile had taken on his relationships and loved ones.

The scars of interrupted relationships with his children were never resolved completely. Yet he never doubted the correctness of dedicating his life to the struggle and his affection and loyalty to the men and women who had been in exile with him and had galvanised anti-apartheid sentiment around the world was also enduring. This was especially true of his love and respect for OR Tambo.

In his later years Reg especially cherished the memories of the best that the ANC had been, and the highest aspirations they had striven for. He was not in denial of compromises that had been made, but he would contextualise these in the light of the hugely difficult circumstances they faced, given the aggression of the South African state, and how choices were constrained. His admiration for the qualities he recognised in the struggle leadership came through in moments such as when I was preparing for a conference and asked him what he would say characterised great African leadership. He said, “Well, I’m not sure what one could isolate as characteristics, but I know who has embodied it. Albert Luthuli, for one.”

He would tell me that the mistake Coloured intellectuals had made was to think that they were leading the struggle, when the leadership was undoubtedly African people, like Chief Luthuli, OR Tambo and Nelson Mandela.

Although Reg became frail and was very confused in the year after he had had a stroke, he retained the characteristics that endeared him to me and so many others. He had the habit of surreptitiously feeding our dog titbits under the table while we were eating; he never failed to give him something of whatever he himself was eating. Once at breakfast I realized Reg was conscientiously sharing the tablets that I had put out on the table for him. He was highly indignant when I intervened, insisting that our pet was entitled to his share.

Even after his stroke, however, his confusion would give inklings of the deep effects on his psyche of the traumatic times he had lived through. When in the hospital, he confided in me that “This is the best prison I have ever been in!” and asked me to quiz the man in the bed next to him on what he was “in for.” On one occasion, when he was mostly confined to his bed in the year that followed, I came into the room to help him put on clean clothes. I said, “Reg, I am coming to change you.” His expression changed to alarm, and he said, “What? Are you coming to detain me?” So poignant. His sweetness was a part of him to the very end.

Interestingly, after the stroke he spoke only Afrikaans. His command of the language was actually quite shaky, although he always saw it as the language of his people. I can only assume that Afrikaans had been very present in his early childhood home, perhaps through a grandparent. Often, he would ask me “Wat is [English word] in Afrikaans nou weer?”²¹ I found this so curious, as he obviously knew the English word, and could have used the English in the first place, but his delight in shaping the Afrikaans words in his mouth was obvious, especially if the words were complex and multisyllabic. “*Onaanvaarbaar!*”²² or “*Uiters Belangrik!*”²³ he would say with a twinkle in his eye.

Reg gave me the sweetest gift in his last words to me. He had been unable to speak for several days but on the morning of the day he passed away, he said some words. I helped make him comfortable and encouraged him to try and move up a few inches in the bed. He looked at me with a naughty twinkle in his eyes. Recognising his characteristic mischievous look, I asked “What is it now?” He replied in a breathless whisper that was barely audible, “Your

²¹ What is [.] in Afrikaans again?

²² Unacceptable

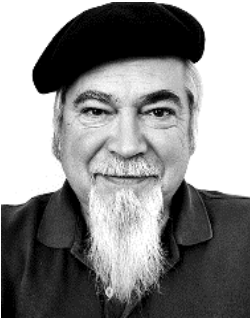
²³ Of utmost importance

voice – *maak my tekere*²⁴.” So, the last thing he told me, as a dying 90-year-old, was that he found me irresistibly sexy.

I know this concluding chapter has read like a love letter. It is.

²⁴ Is driving me crazy

About The Authors



Patric Tariq Mellet MSc is a former liberation movement cadre who served with Reg September in Botswana, Zambia, the UK, and with Reg's post-Apartheid "Roots & Visions" project. He worked in the liberation movement Press and Radio Freedom. In 2020 he helped realise Reg September's quest to establish the Camissa Museum at the Castle in Cape Town, looking at the 195 streams of origin of Camissa Africans (Coloured people) of SA – rooted in African-Asian enslaved and Cape Indigenous peoples. **Books authored** – The Lie of 1652 – a decolonial history of land; Cleaner's Boy – a Resistance Road to a Liberated Life; Lenses on Cape Identities – Exploring Roots in South Africa; The Black Roots of the Cape Vine.



Melissa Steyn PhD is the spouse of the late Reg September, who holds the SA Research Chair in Critical Diversity Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand and is founding director of the Wits Centre for Diversity Studies. She is best known for her work on whiteness in post-apartheid South Africa.

Books authored – Whiteness just isn't what it used to be: white identity in a changing South Africa, which won an Outstanding Scholarship Award from the National Communication Association in the United States. She has published eight co-authored books and numerous journal articles.