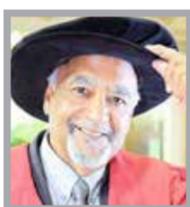




SOUTH African exiles and anti-apartheid activists salute the funeral procession of MP Naicker. | Suganya Chetty

# 'MP' paid the price for freedom

*Mariemuthoo Pragalathan 'MP' Naicker has earned an honoured place in the annals of South African freedom. This year marks the centenary of his birth. Judge Thumba Pillay reflects on his life's work in this second article in a two-part series*



THE strains and stresses of detention, imprisonment, hide-and-seek from the security police and its agents, life in exile, impacts significantly on family life, especially the children. On the occasion of celebrating the 90th birthday of MP Naicker's wife Saro, Struggle veteran Mac Maharaj reflected on some of MP's thoughts while held in solitary confinement.

"There is the question each of us raises when we are alone with our own thoughts: what did we do to the people who love us, our spouses, our children, family? What price they had to pay for the choices we imposed on them? The fact is that in many cases we inflicted irreparable damage on those closest to us. We were selfish. Our vision for the future of our people blinded us to any other view. "It is a kind of introspection that lingers in our consciences and it recently prompted me to write that it is our spouses, children and families who paid the heaviest price." – Nelson Mandela

The story of MP Naicker is not complete without reflecting on some of the most poignant moments of his thoughts during months and months of detention in solitary, his thoughts and concern for family and what is it that detainees do and think about when in solitary and there is no end in sight.

I have had the privilege of reading some of those letters and wish space would have allowed the recording of some of the most heartbreaking moments in solitary confinement. Writing on one such spell in solitary confinement, and at a time when children most need the guidance and wise counsel of parents, MP spent much of his time worrying about his dear daughter Suganya (five years older than Prenaven), who was reaching that stage when the mysteries and intricacies of life are brought to bear upon the young as they reach adolescence.

He wrote that she (Suganya) was reaching that time in life when boys would show interest in her and she likewise would puzzle over those changes in life that no longer puzzle as we mature into adulthood.

He writes about all these things with great sensitivity, as would a writer with his skill with words. In one such letter, he writes: "You are that age when your mind will no doubt be occupied with other things than only your studies. Boys will no doubt play some part in your thoughts. All I ask is that you do not do anything in secret in this connection. Secrets in matters such as this are usually the downfall of most young people. Don't make this mistake..."

Of his son Prenaven, too, MP worried about his studies and looked to Suganya to help him along. These are

poignant and painful moments that fathers and mothers of young children faced while serving sentences in exile, or held in isolation – the fate of loved ones in the absence of one or the other caregiver.

Suganya, we know eventually joined her father in exile and lived in Scotland, where she lives to this day, and while there was forever active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Prenaven qualified in medicine in Moscow in 1979 and spent much of his time taking care of ANC cadres in exile in Africa.

Apart from his wife Saro, Suganya, the older of his two children, was his pillar of strength and MP relied on her to give the young Prenaven guidance and advice.

Suganya excelled in setting up a sound footing for the Anti-Apartheid Solidarity Movement in Scotland, in an effort to mobilise international support for those engaged in the freedom Struggle. Prenaven points out that Suganya earned respect as an ANC activist in Scotland, to the extent that she was honoured by being asked to unveil the Woman and Child Statute in Edinburgh. The plaque bears her name.

MP's love of family and of home and his birthplace here in South Africa is perhaps best illustrated in his misgivings about going into exile. He loved his beloved South Africa so much so that he was quite prepared, with all its attendant risks, to remain here and work underground. He did eventually flee the country in the company of Nandha (Steve) Naidoo by crossing the border into Botswana, finally making his way to London where he unstintingly devoted himself with distinction to his work as the head of communications and publicity of the ANC and the Communist Party.

On a lighter note, in the cut and



MP Naicker with his grandchild Humsha in 1974. | Suganya Chetty, Family Archives



MP and Saro Naicker in exile in London. | UKZN Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre Archives

thrust of Struggle history, there are those moments that in retrospect we can recount with something of a smile, such as the many I've experienced with Mac Maharaj, for instance. And here is one as recounted by Naidoo in his own words when he and MP crossed the border into Bechuanaland on Easter Friday, April 16, 1965.

"Our driver dropped us at a point we hoped was about two miles (3.2km) from the South African border post. He was so agitated that when he turned the car it stalled. We had to push-start the car and the driver sped away. It was very early dawn as we walked into the bush.

"After a while, MP asked me to climb a tree to check our direction. Neither of us had brought a compass. When I saw a well-made road ahead, I thought it must be the road leading to Lobatse. Strange though it may seem, I hadn't thought how we would cross a physical border!

"However, MP quickly assessed that we were walking back to the South African border control road. We needed to change direction, going deeper into the bush. Finally we arrived at a high barbed wire fence. Beyond this was a stretch of no man's land and another barbed wire fence in the distance.

"MP now said that he had forgotten to carry a wire cutter. Having not even considered carrying one, I just set about climbing over. The tricky part was getting over the top. When my coat snagged on the wire, MP helped to get me free. I should have waited for him to clear this first fence, but

with my adrenalin pumping, I jumped down. I was already running for the next fence when I realised that MP's coat had snagged, too. I was about to come back when he fortunately released himself and we were able to climb over the second fence together."

MP's life story reads like a *Who's Who* of the liberation Struggle. Born on July 28 1920, his untimely death at a young 56 shocked all those who were an integral part of that Struggle and who, unlike him, were fortunate to taste its fruits.

He was an indefatigable worker for the movement, a brilliant and courageous journalist and gave all he had even as he took his last breath when on a flight to East Germany to have *Sechaba* printed.

It is impossible in limited space to do justice to the story of MP, who as early as 1944 gave up a job as a van driver to become a full-time trade unionist with the likes of George Ponen and HA Naidoo. Within a short span of just about 10 years, he was one of the 156 in the 1956 Treason Trial, joining as co-accused political icons such as Dr Monty Naicker, Nelson Mandela, Ruth First, Helen Joseph, Yusuf Dadoo and Chief Albert Luthuli. We know, of course, that at the time of his passing he was the director of information and publicity of the ANC.

His invaluable role in both the ANC and the SACP and in the liberation movement as a whole is best captured in a message delivered on his death by a celebrity of no less stature than Oliver Tambo: "MP has passed away at what is probably the beginning of the most challenging time in the history of our Struggle. We salute him for his contribution, one that he began as a young man.

"And it is without question that it is the solid foundation he so ably helped to establish, which makes it possible for our movement to meet the demands we face in our revolutionary Struggle.

"The cream of our youth is flooding to the ANC today and living up to the finest traditions of the Struggle. This is the best tribute which can be made to MP and comrades like him."

*Pillay is a retired judge and Struggle stalwart. Judge Pillay was part of an online tribute to MP Naicker last month, which was hosted by the 1860 Heritage Centre, an agency of the KZN Department of Arts and Culture.*



THE lonely walk of life in exile. MP Naicker in Berlin. | UKZN Gandhi Luthuli Documentation Centre Archives