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A F R I C A N N A T I O N A L C O N G R E S S
(South Africa)

O B I T U A R Y

L I L I A N M A S E D I B A N G O Y I

When the full history of the struggle of the peoples of South Africa is written, pride of place will go to the women who struggled not only against racist domination in our country, but for the mobilization of all the women of South Africa to fight this system. The name of Lilian Masediba Ngoyi, who died on March 13th, 1980 at the age of 68, will occupy the first position in the list of names of these heroines of our struggle.

It was with deep sorrow and an irreparable sense of loss that the Women's Section of the African National Congress of South Africa learnt of the passing away of Ma-Ngoyi, as Lilian was popularly known throughout the length and breadth of our country and abroad.

Lilian Ngoyi's history of struggle and active work in the ranks of the liberation movement is a clear testimony of the ability of our people to rise up, defying all restrictions of educational and other opportunities imposed by the apartheid regime on the indigenous black majority.

Born in a small village Ga-Matlala outside Pretoria in 1911, Lilian was the daughter of a mine-worker who later became a packer in a shop. With the meagre wages he was receiving, Lilian's father, through much sacrifice, took her through primary school at the Kilnerton Institute in Pretoria. Like most African Mothers, Lilian's mother was doing some temporary jobs in the white homes around Pretoria, doing washing.

Due to lack of funds Lilian Ngoyi was forced to quit school and she went to the City Deep Mine Hospital, where she worked as a probationer. Soon thereafter she got married. A few years later her husband died. Lilian later did some training in nursing, but could not pursue that field either, due to lack of funds. She was therefore forced to go and work as a machinist in a clothing factory, from 1945 to 1956. She became a member of the Garment Workers' Union, lrf by Solly Sachs, and it was during this period that her determination to struggle for the

the right of her fellow workers to better conditions and the right of her own people to freedom and justice was roused.

The 50's is a period of time in the political life of South Africa noted for the shift in the tactics employed by our revolutionary movement. The A. N. C. moved from a position of protesting against minority rule to challenging the apartheid structures and all that they stand for. In 1952 we launched the Defiance Campaign, in which thousands of people participated, defying all institutions of apartheid. It was during this campaign. She was arrested for "using white post office facilities".

Lilian's flair for public speaking was soon discovered and she became a regular feature on A.N.C. platforms. Combined with her natural gift as an organiser and her simple, down-to-earth but dynamic personality, she was soon to win the hearts of the thousands of A.N.C. members and supporters, particularly the women, who saw in Ma-Ngoyi a true example of what a house-wife, a mother and a daughter that Lilian was can achieve for the liberation of our people.

By 1954 when the Federation of South African Women, a multi-racial women's organisation was formed, she became one of the National Vice-Presidents of the Federation, by virtue of her being President of the Transvaal branch of the Federation. She was subsequently elected President of the Federation, thus becoming the second President of this important organisation of the women of South Africa.

By 1956 Lilian had been elected President of the African National Congress Women's League, and serving in the National Executive Committee of the A.N.C. This remarkable achievement enabled her in March 1956 to be chosen as the South African Drum magazine's Masterpiece in Bronze Personality. The magazine referred to her as "the new tough type of women leaders, the woman factory worker who is tough as granite on the outside, but soft and compassionate deep in her."

As the A.N.C. and the ideals that we are struggling for became known internationally, there arose a need to send tested cadres of our revolutionary movement to foreign countries to further

further explain our struggle and rally international support and solidarity with our struggle from democratic and peace-loving forces the world over. Lilian was therefore included in a delegation of the Federation of South African Women that attended a conference in Lausanne, Switzerland. By then she was so well-known as an opponent of the apartheid system that she had to be smuggled out of the country. This was after she and other African delegates were turned away from a boat in Cape Town as they did not have passports. Undaunted as always, Lilian left and returned quietly - by air!

While abroad she visited the headquarters of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) based in the German Democratic Republic. She also visited several socialist countries, including the Soviet Union and the then progressive China. She also visited sites of the Nazi extermination camps and returned to South Africa with a renewed fervour to fight for the freedom of all humanity. On her return Lilian moved to all corners of our country, rallying thousands into the Congress movement and giving her impressions about what she had seen abroad. She would hold large audiences spell-bound for more than two or three hours at a time.

In her capacity as President of the African National Congress Women's League and President of the Federation of South African Women, Ma-Ngoyi and scores of other women leaders, her Secretary in the Federation Helen Joseph, Dorothy Nyembe (now serving a 15-year jail imprisonment term), Frances Baard, Sophie Williams, Dora Tamane and others set out to organise women for the great protest demonstration of 1956, a demonstration that was against the extension of the hated pass laws to affect women. August 9th, 1956! While Prime Minister Strijdom remained out of sight, 20,000 women led by Lilian Ngoyi, overflowed the amphitheatre of the Union Buildings, rocking the cabinet - and the country as a whole - to the realization that African women do not want passes! Lilian was one of the nine leaders representing women of all races, who carried the huge piles of protest forms and entered the Building. This was no ordinary delegation that she was leading. It was a unique display of our women's determination to reject a system that dehumanises the black people in our country.

In the minds of the thousands of the participants of the August 9 1956 demonstration, Lilian Ngoyi is still remembered. The regime has tried to erase the memory of Ma-Ngoyi from the many who saw, heard, followed and respected her, but the memory of this gallant women's leader cannot be wiped out. It is in memory of her dynamic leadership and of the other fighters who led that demonstration that August 9th continues to be celebrated in all parts of the world as "SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN'S DAY".

The regime of apartheid is notorious for its brutal suppression and harassment of all those who fight for its destruction. Lilian is one of those who have been victim of this constant intimidation. In December 1956 she was arrested and stood trial as one of the accused in the Treason Trial in which 156 leaders of our struggle were accused of 'high treason'. Four years later, when the trial eventually fizzled out, with the final acquittals, Lilian, together with Helen Joseph, were the only women trialists left. She was however detained for 5 months during the 1960 State of Emergency.

After clamping down on the liberation movement by banning the A.N.C., the minority white racist Nationalist Government went on to ban, banish and restrict hundreds of activists of our movement. Lilian was among the first to be banned in 1962 when she was slapped with a 10-year banning order, which elapsed in 1972.

Lilian's ban elapsed at a time when a new generation had emerged and was carrying on the struggle that had been fought for centuries in our country. These fighters, who were found in the ranks of the Black Consciousness Movement, found in Lilian a source of inspiration and a guiding light to their activities. Many leaders of these movements sought granny Ma-Ngoyi's advice on numerous issues, they asked her to address their meetings, and she was readily available for any task put before her. Undaunted by the constant harassment she was facing, Lilian continued defying the racists' provocations. Not surprising, her banning orders were renewed in 1975. Unable to work because of her bans, she continued to do private dress-making at her Orlando home to make ends meet.

It was while she was serving this order that our dear friend, our mother and our comrade Lilian Masediba Ngoyi, passed away after

after a short illness. Although she has departed from our midst, we shall forever hold dear the memory of our beloved President. Her life of dedication and unpretentiousness, her selflessness and her devotion to the cause of freedom is a shining example to - not only us the women of South Africa - but to women of the whole world. Having been rated as one of the most dynamic women leaders by the publication "THE WORLD:WHO'S WHO AMONG WOMEN",Lilian's deeds have taught us the women of South Africa that ability to organise for the final onslaught against racist oppression and devotion to the ideals of our bitter struggle is the criterion for true leadership. Having been able to combine her role as a widowed mother of two and the sole support of her aging mother, she taught us that individual role as women in the fierce struggle going on inside the country.

It is only befitting to her dear memory that as we lower our revolutionary banner and bid farewell to Ma-Ngoyi, we the women of South Africa, Black and White, should make a solemn vow and pledge to rededicate ourselves to the ideals that our fallen martyrs, Lilian Ngoyi, Bram Fischer, Moses Kotane, Mary Moodley and Solomon Mahlangu lived and died upholding. The ideals of a free and just South Africa. Let us vow over the graves of these heroes and heroines, that we shall never rest until these ideals have been achieved.

ROBALA KA KGOTSO MA-NGOYI

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