

## **An open letter...**

Mac Maharaj

### **Early days**

You will remember we met at the University of Natal in 1953. You will recall the many conversations expressing resentment at being excluded from the main university campus and library; our refusal to attend a lecture to be delivered by a visiting American academic; and our boycott of the graduation ceremony. You will also recall that we organised a weekend camping on my dad's farm and the discussions that took place there. The students attending were representative of the population of South Africa. My father lent us his truck to transport the students from Durban to the farm and back to Durban. You will also recall that we arranged a gathering of students representing the diversity of the South African population on a beach not far from Durban.

You left for London in 1957 and I followed a few months later to study law at the University of London. I shared accommodation with you, Hassim Seedat and Tony Seedat in a bedsit in Notting Hill and later a flat in 23 Downhills Park Road, Tottenham. We used to meet at the home of South African exiles Patsy and Vella Pillay (employed by the Bank of China) to have political discussions.

We volunteered in the anti-apartheid movement, addressed small local groups explaining our opposition to the apartheid policies of the South African Government and its effects on the impoverished and disempowered citizenry.

In early 1961 you went to East Germany. You studied printing there and returned to South Africa in early 1962. I went to the People's Republic of China to study Radio Technology and Communication during which time my mother died and I was unable to keep my promise to my dad to return when he needed me. I returned to South Africa in December 1962. I presented the authorities at Jan Smuts airport, Johannesburg, my South African passport. It was well past its renewal date. The official looked at my passport and rang his superior. Following a brief conversation, I was allowed to take a flight to Durban. A visit from the Security police followed my return to my father's home. I was on their watch list.

I knew, when I returned to South Africa in December 1962, that I was placing my life and liberty at risk in the struggle against apartheid. It was the same for you. You were my sole link to the High Command of the resistance. We had to trust each other.

Following instructions from the High Command which you communicated to me, I made two visits to Johannesburg, a city which I didn't know but where you lived. On the first occasion, I travelled by train and stayed with you. You introduced me to Ruth First, already banned as a journalist. We met in a library. I had not been able to get articles in Durban but Ruth then arranged for me to be articulated in Durban to her lawyer friend J.N. Singh. By the time of the arrests of the High Command at Rivonia in July 1963, her husband Joe Slovo had fled the country. She was subsequently detained for 117 days. On that trip, you conveyed an instruction to me to make an audio-oscillator for training in Morse Code.

On the second occasion, at the request of Wilton Mkwayi (as member of MK's reconstituted High Command) and Ruth First (as member of the banned Central Committee of the Communist Party) you drove me from Durban to Johannesburg around March 1964. Again, I stayed in your lodgings in 21 Pearce Street, Doornfontein, where you introduced me to a fair-haired man. I don't recall whether you stayed but your visitor and I discussed the possibility of making a transmitter. I took one of his journals with radio circuits. I subsequently learned his name when we were awaiting trial. He was Lionel Gay, a lecturer in physics at the University of Witwatersrand who would later give state evidence against you.

### **Arrests and trials**

On 11 June 1964, 8 of the Rivonia accused, including Nelson Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment. Then came the next wave of arrests aimed at breaking all echelons of resistance...

Lionel Gay was arrested on 27 June 1964.

Your arrest followed on the 6 July 1964.

I was arrested four days later on the 10 July 1964. Captain 'Rooi Rus' Swanepoel, your chief interrogator and torturer, came personally to the police station at Hillcrest near Durban to escort me to Johannesburg.

Lionel Gay signed a statement on 20 July 1964.

I refused to sign a statement on 20 July 1964.

You and I were both held in solitary confinement in police cells at Marshall Square, Johannesburg. I recall seeing you in the washroom, hands trembling and in a terrible state. You apologised for identifying me to the security police. I accepted your apology. I knew you would have held out as long as humanly possible but the pain must have become unbearable. This is something I have never held against you. I chose not to speak about it and, for many years, the only person who knew how I came to be arrested was my wife Beverley. In 2003, when she heard I was to be interviewed by your biographer, Pdraig O'Malley, she asked me whether I would speak to him about this. I said I wouldn't. I didn't think it relevant.

As far as I was concerned, our relationship continued as one of friendship. During the second half of 1964, we spent time together as awaiting trial prisoners, although earmarked for different trials. In November 1964, Lionel Gay gave evidence against you, Accused Number 5, in the case of State v Wilton Mkwayi and Others in the Supreme Court of South Africa (Witwatersrand Local Division). You were sentenced to twelve years.

After many adjournments, my trial was brief, ending on 1 March 1965. I was charged with receiving military training in China. Lionel Gay, who was due to give evidence against me, fortunately fled the country shortly beforehand with help from the underground. Following

cross-examination, the other state witness, Patrick Mthembu, who had given state evidence in the Rivonia Trial, was asked by the judge whether he would tell a lie to save his own skin. He remained quiet. The judge found his evidence to be unreliable and I was released, having no case to answer. I was lucky.

### **Ongoing friendship... or so I thought**

Before I could be placed under house arrest, I escaped to Botswana where I lived as a refugee until able to make my way to the UK in 1966. After my marriage to Beverley, we kept abreast of news through your wife Tim who remained in South Africa until just before your release. We also received news through Paul Joseph, our fellow detainee at the Fort. After your release, we recall Tim's welcome party for you in London as a joyous occasion.

We were sad when your marriage broke down but passed no judgement. You chose to return to the underground struggle in the African front line states. After you remarried, we welcomed you and Zarina to our home. Our children loved you. You were like an uncle who made sudden exciting appearances. Zarina came with your one-week-old baby son to stay with us in Watford and, in the following years, our family grew to know and love both your children. On your visits, you always knew you could call on us for use of our home, our car, our support. We believed the work in which you were engaged was important for South Africa's liberation. After 1994, while you were Minister of Transport in Mandela's government, we stayed briefly with your family on a couple of occasions during visits to South Africa.

When you subsequently came under attack, with aspersions of corruption, I could not believe that you would have fallen so low. Although rarely in contact by this time, I defended you in conversations with others. I defended your integrity when interviewed by Pdraig O'Malley in 2003. In retrospect, I was quite unprepared for that interview. I had put so much behind me, even forgetting the date of my arrest and had no desire to look for papers or records until after the publication of your biography-cum-autobiography *Shades of Difference: Mac Maharaj and the Struggle for South Africa* by Viking Penguin in 2007 "*Shades of Difference*". I bought a copy of the book soon after it came out.

### **The book, your interviews... and fabrications**

#### Your identity

In his Introduction to *Shades of Difference*, O'Malley states,

"Whenever Mac gave me his version of an event or conversation that involved other people, I sought out those persons, if they were still alive, either to verify the accuracy of Mac's memory or to record the other person's recollection, if different."  
(p35)

In my case, that did not happen. Although O'Malley interviewed me, he never presented me with your claims. The first I knew about them - and that they were defamatory - was when reading the book in a section written by you.

On p134, under 'Identity Uncovered', you directly accuse me of having told the police your name, leading to "extra torture". I was shocked by this distortion of truth and wrote to you and O'Malley immediately. You were in London and arranged to meet me and Beverley. You were apologetic over any "hurt" caused to our family. However, when I said that you had reversed the truth - namely, that my arrest came about through you 'cracking' under torture and giving my name - you challenged me, saying "you can't prove it". What I'd assumed to be our friendship had spanned more than fifty years. I think I must have been still in shock as I decided not to pursue the matter, despite my deep unhappiness at your accusation.

I tried to put the matter out of my mind but later, when I began reading your interviews on O'Malley's 'Heart of Hope' website, I realised that this distortion of truth wasn't a matter of you simply remaking memories. Instead, this suggested something more systematic - and the intention seemed to be to discredit me.

In your interview with O'Malley on 11 October 2002, you said that the police found your "real name was Maharaj..." and "They found it out from Steve Naidoo" (as I was known at the time).

You went on to say that I was incarcerated in a cell on your "left" and I was tapping on the wall and "the sounds are indicating Morse code". I wasn't in the cell next to you but further away in an adjacent corridor and did not attempt to communicate through Morse which is near impossible on a wall. This, and the late night "shouted conversation" you claim in the book (p134) did not occur. **What you said and wrote is untrue.** I was not asked your real name. Gay, interrogated before you, knew you as Mac and they were more interested in our relationship and what I was doing. They couldn't believe I had not been put to work in Durban.

You went beyond claiming a "shouted conversation" with me in this interview and went on to say that a fellow detainee, Ameen Cajee, nicknamed Doha - Old Man - reported seeing me drag a mattress from the white section i.e. implying that I was given this as a reward for collaborating with the security police. This is untrue, indeed slanderous. I refused to sign a statement and slept on a mat like everyone else throughout my detention. O'Malley interviewed Doha on 10 September 2002, i.e. a month prior to your interview of 11 October 2002. There is no record of O'Malley going back to Doha to check your defamatory remarks about the mattress, nor did O'Malley put them to me during my interview of 28 November 2003. In both cases, he did not follow the methodology he outlined in his Introduction.

Although you used the pseudonym 'Solly Matthews' for underground work, everyone in the underground, including Lionel Gay, called you Mac. Gay would have named you as Mac during his interrogation before your arrest. With your one eye, it wouldn't have been difficult for the security police to discover your full identity. In *Shades of Difference*, you write that your applications for a passport in Newcastle, then in Dundee, then in Pietermaritzburg had been turned down (p74/5) but you got a passport in Durban with the help of a friendly policeman. Later you write, "I was travelling on a South African passport" (p101). The apartheid State authorities would have had several applications for a passport bearing your name and two certified copies of your photograph with each application. All of this information would have been available to the security police.

## Lionel Gay

“In the meantime, though, Mkwai and Ruth asked me to go to Natal to make contact Steve, which I did. I brought him to Jo’burg, and he met with MK. At my home on Pearce Street, he met with someone **I later learned was Lionel Gay**, who used to teach physics at Wits.” *Shades of Difference*, p109

You make no reference in the book to your part in arranging my meeting with Lionel Gay, a member of the reconstituted High Command. You brought me from Durban and, as Lionel Gay stated in evidence at your trial, you personally introduced me to him at your lodgings. This was one of the charges of which you were convicted. For my part, I would not have spoken to Lionel Gay, a man I didn’t know, if you had not introduced me to him and, by so doing, vouched for his credentials.

When you were detained, you were aware that Lionel Gay had been detained before you. When you identified me to your interrogators, you knew that I would be detained as a consequence, hence your apology to me in the washroom at Marshall Square. What puzzles me is why you found it necessary to fabricate your narrative that I identified you to the security police. Why didn’t you attribute this to Lionel Gay, the man to whom you introduced me and who gave evidence against you at your trial? I am not a psychologist. But is it that you cannot admit that you weren’t super-human but just an ordinary human being who ‘cracked’ under torture, leading to my arrest?

## “He was a friend of mine”

In 1990, after Mandela’s release from jail, you received an amnesty to return to South Africa. Following the unravelling of Operation Vula, you were arrested in July but released on bail on 8 November. You were interviewed by Howard Barrell on 19 November 1990. He asked you about me in relation to the first underground trainees in China.

Barrell: “Where is he now? Is he around?”

You: “He was not earmarked for a high command position.”

Barrell: “Has he emerged again?”

You: “No, he became – he was arrested, detained with us, got away in his court case for lack of corroborative evidence, went out and became disgruntled and vanished. He was a friend of mine.”

Reading this, I was stunned. You knew where I lived. Beverley and I hosted your family; you and your family dined at our table; your children played with mine. Just four months before your interview with Howard Barrell, on the day you were arrested for Operation Vula, we brought Zarina and the children to stay with us in Bournemouth. They had been due to fly out to join you. This is what Zarina said for your biography:

“Steve and Beverley Naidoo came to fetch us from Brighton when they heard the news; they didn’t even consult us – they came in their car, packed us into the car, and took us away, which was very nice, and looked after the kids... I was incapable of looking after my kids at that point. I was shocked, devastated. They filled in, but Joey

and Milou were devastated... They kept saying, "When are we going home, when are we going home?" *Shades of Difference*, p461

You knew where I lived. Yet you clearly didn't want Howard Barrell to be in touch with me. You told him that I "became disgruntled and vanished. He *was* a friend of mine."

Why, Mac? Why?

*Faulkner: "The past is never dead. It is not even past."*

Nandha  
18 July 2019

Note: I sent this Open Letter to Mac Maharaj and copied Pdraig O'Malley. I received no reply from Mac Maharaj. Pdraig O'Malley replied "let me immediately apologise for not referring back to you regarding Mac's saying it was you who fingered him to the police. On something so important & damning there is little excuse for my not doing so & I take the responsibility."

Nandha Naidoo  
27 August 2019.