

# The Thinker

FOR THOUGHT LEADERS

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**Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane** was a political prisoner on Robben Island. He has been involved in campaigns to abolish debt, combat poverty, tackle HIV/AIDS and promote the UN Millennium Development Goals. In 2006 he launched African Monitor, to monitor and promote the effective implementation of promises made by the international community and African governments for the continent's development. He is also involved with the Historic Schools Restoration Project and Chair of the Council of the University of Cape Town. Archbishop Ndungane was bestowed the "Order of the Grand Counsellor of the Baobab: Silver" by President Thabo Mbeki in April 2008. ■

**The Journal for  
Progressive Thought**

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Vusizwe Media

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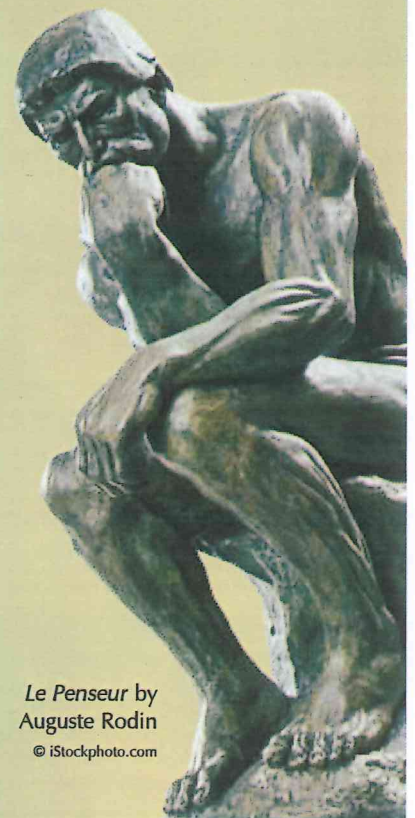
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Printed by CTP Printers, Cape Town, South Africa  
www.thethinker.co.za

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**THEY DIED SINGING!**

# A Historical Perspective in the Liberation of South Africa



Sentenced to death for allegedly ordering the killing of an informer, Vuyisile Mini subsequently rejected a reprieve offered him if he gave evidence against others. He, together with Wilton Khayinga and Zinakile Mkaba, went to the gallows singing Mini's song "Naants' indod' emnyama Verwoerd"

By Neo Lekgotla

On Friday, November 6th 1964, at 05h30 in the morning in Pretoria Central Prison, Vuyisile Mini, Diliza Wilton Khayinga and Zinakile Mkhamba of the ANC branch in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, went to the gallows singing struggle and freedom songs. The prisoners' hair was shaved off and photographs were taken before they were hanged; these pictures opposite are probably the last photographs taken of Mini, Khayinga and Mkhamba alive.<sup>2</sup>

The cover page of *The Star* of Friday 6th November 1964 carried the story of the execution titled "3 Saboteurs hanged." The article reports that "Three Africans, Vuyisile Mini, Wilson Khayinga and Zinakel Okabu, who were sentenced to death in Port Alfred in March for murder and sabotage, were executed at the Pretoria Central Prison today."<sup>3</sup>

A moving Tribute by Govan Mbeki to these three men and others involved with them in the struggle, provides us with a historical perspective of the circumstances that led to the hanging of his comrades by the apartheid government.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the liberation struggle in the Eastern Cape during

the separate locations where typewriters and duplicators used for underground purposes were to be found. In the same offices James Kati, popularly known as Castro, was the main link with the ANC branches. Next door were the offices of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

Vuyisile Mini worked there with Alwin Benny, Don Nangu and Caleb Mayekiso. There was a connecting door between the SACTU and ANC offices. Across the street at the Barclays Bank building Raymond Mhlaba worked at an Attorney's office, and so did Collin Jankolewitz, who was for many years a lawyer for the ANC.

From their windows at the Law Court across the street, the Special Branch watched the activities of the network of Anti-Apartheid forces at the Court Chambers. They visited the offices frequently but the work of the struggle for liberation still continued. When the Special Branch made it difficult for meetings to take place they met in open spaces and took quick decisions.

When Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) was launched in 1961 it was established according to its unwritten Constitution: a National High Command; a regional Command of Three. A region then set

the biggest number of MK units. A member of one of these units broke down and told everything he knew. The police released him from jail as their key witness. The Eastern Cape Regional Command decided to remove him from the scene and gave instructions to a unit to do so. The man was shot dead at his home.

During the police swoop of the early 1960s Kolisile Mdwayi broke down and was used by the police in a number of cases. He told them that the decision to kill was taken by Vuyisile Mnini, Diliza Kayiso and Zinakile Mkaba. Members of MK took an Oath (Isifungo): one of the conditions of the Oath was that they would never give information to the Security police. This was amended to say if one broke down under torture he would not give any information which would incriminate his comrades.

Govan Mbeki explained: "When we were arrested at Rivonia we fought for our lives. I used to communicate from the Palace of Justice in Pretoria High Court with our Comrades who had been already sentenced to death. We reminded each other of the vow; 'if you die you go down alone'."

Oom Gov concluded his tribute

**“ I would sing with a strong voice so that they would all hear. We must show that our death would not mark the end of the liberation movement, but would be an inspiration to our people in their struggle. ”**

the underground days centres around Court Chambers, opposite the Magistrates Court in Port Elizabeth. Court Chambers was partly a Trade Union Centre. The Textile Workers Union at No.9 Court Chambers was led by Crissy Jansen, the Laundry Workers Union at No.8 was led by Stella Damons, the Food and Canning Workers Union at No. 20 was led by Lily Diederiks and Frances Baard, a top trade union organiser.

For some years the *New Age* newspaper shared the Textile Workers Union office. It was led by Govan Mbeki and Wilton Mkwai. When the Food and Canning moved to its new offices near Langeberg Corporation, *New Age* took over No. 20 Court Chambers. Mountain Ngqungwana was the key communication man who alone knew

up units of three. In the Eastern Cape the Regional Command consisted of Diliza Kayingo as Commander, Zinakile Mkaba, and Kolisile Mdwayi.

Vuyisile Mini was then appointed Political Commissar of the Eastern Cape Command. His function was to advise the Regional Command on political matters and to make sure that its work was in keeping with the policies of the ANC.

MK started with sabotage activities according to instructions from the High Command; they did not carry fire-arms. Within a short time they asked permission to carry fire-arms because the guards at all Government building as well as big business carried fire-arms and shot at night. The Eastern Cape, which covered the area from Transkei to Grahamstown to Knysna, had the

by saying that "These Comrades went down alone protecting the movement so that it carried on the struggle. These were men of exceptional courage. Even as they were sent to the gallows they sang... On numerous occasions, Vuyisile Mini, with his beautiful voice, led the struggle in song."

As a consequence, in the annals of liberation struggle Vuyisile Mini is honoured as the activist composer and singer who carried the "gospel of Congress" further by way of song. "There are many freedom songs which we have no idea who the authors are, but there's an author who wrote many of the freedom songs. One cannot talk about freedom songs without talking about Vuyisile Mini."<sup>5</sup>

The double CD compilation of South African Freedom Songs: Inspiration for

Liberation is dedicated to the memory of Vuyisile Mini (1920-1964). He is the "Freedom fighter, composer and singer who gave his life in the struggle for our freedom. Sentenced to death for allegedly ordering the killing of an informer, he subsequently rejected a reprieve offered him if he gave evidence against others. He, together with Wilton Khayinga and Zinakile Mkaba, went to the gallows singing Mini's song "Naants' indod' emnyama Verwoerd" "Here comes the black men Verwoerd, watch out Verwoerd".<sup>6</sup>

It was social justice of immense importance that the documentary film about the struggle songs, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, starts with the fascinating and moving footage of the exhuming of Mini's remains in 1998 from an apartheid prison graveyard, where he was buried in an unmarked grave and without the knowledge or presence of his family. The ANC, an organisation that he served with so much devotion and dedication, arranged the exhumation in order to give his family the opportunity to provide him with a respectable burial.

Vuyisile Mini was born at Mhlahlane, Tsomo, in the Eastern Cape in 1920. After completing Standard Six, the highest education open to him, he went to the mines and then, in 1945, he moved to Port Elizabeth. He joined Raymond Mhlaba and Govan Mbeki in the 1952 Defiance Campaign, and was charged in the Treason Trial of 1956. He was a stalwart of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), organising unions for metalworkers, dockworkers and construction workers in Port Elizabeth. When the African National Congress adopted the armed struggle after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, Mini became its commander in the Eastern Cape. Starting on the day that MK was launched, on December 16, 1961, MK implemented 58 acts of sabotage in Port Elizabeth, more than in any other part of the country. Mini became the first MK Commander to be executed in South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

During the Treason Trial of 1956, Mini was "detained in Rooi [Red] Hell (the North End Prison in Port Elizabeth), with Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba. It was here that Mini was to experience real hell when

the prison officials forbade him to sing revolutionary songs."<sup>8</sup>

Through all his arrests and victimisation, Mini reacted with that great gift which heartened all who heard him – his singing. His own compositions, which he sang in the magnificent bass at meetings, in prison and during the mass trials, were militant at all times. Take for example, Mini's most famous song: "Verwoerd pasopa (Verwoerd watch out!) Naants' indod' emnyama" (Here comes the black man).<sup>9</sup> In this song he warns the Prime Minister, who is recognised as the chief architect of apartheid in the consciousness of the African and black majority. The power of this song is its

**“Thath’ umthwalo Buti sigoduke (Take up your things Brother and let’s go)”**

continued relevance for generations throughout all the decades of the white rule in South Africa since its composition in the fifties.

For example, during the eras of B.J. Vorster in the 1970s, P.W. Botha in the 1980s, and F.W. de Klerk in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this song was still sung in the struggle. It was simply adapted by the replacement of 'Verwoerd' with the name of the current leader of the apartheid regime.

The editor of *The Thinker*, Dr. Essop Pahad, told me about his own recollection of singing this Mini composition: "In the late fifties and

**“The excruciatingly beautiful music floated through the barred windows, echoing round the brick exercise yard.”**

early sixties the song "Verwoerd Pasop" was one of the most popular songs we sang when we got together in South Africa. We use to sing it then, and later in exile, with gusto and pride. We use to move around in a circle and when we came to the refrain, we would stamp our feet hard in marching rhythm and move our arms as if brandishing guns."<sup>10</sup>

During the Treason Trial, Elinor Sisulu writes in Walter & Albertina

Sisulu: *In Our Lifetime*: "Walter found that his colleagues had been divided into two groups, each occupying a large communal cell. He was placed with other senior leaders. The prisoners had already organized themselves into political committees. Luthuli likened it to a "Joint Executive of the Congresses" and Mandela called it "the largest and longest unbanned meeting of the Congress Alliance in years." Their programme of activities also included physical training, debates, indoor games and talks on a variety of subjects, including the history of the ANC and the SAIC, and religious services as well. They had also formed the Accused Male Voices Choir, the star of which was the Eastern Cape trade unionist Vuyisile Mini, who entertained them with his extraordinary bass voice."<sup>11</sup>

One of the songs that Mini composed during this long and exhausting Treason Trial expressed the yearning of the accused to return home:

Thath’ umthwalo Buti sigoduke (Take up your things Brother and let’s go)

Balindile omama nobaba 'ekhaya' (They are waiting, our mothers and fathers, at home).<sup>12</sup>

Though Thath’ umthwalo Buti sigoduke is a 1950s song, it carries the feelings of those who went to exile in the post Sharpeville era, and was relevant in prisons countrywide, including on Robben Island.

For Mini, the love for song and singing did not relate only to protest songs, freedom songs or struggle songs. Mini also loved classical music.

He sang in different choirs, including the Port Elizabeth Male Voice Choir. Interestingly enough, some of the choirs that he belonged to included whites who were not involved in the struggle for freedom. He made jokes afterwards about this, when he said that the carried the "gospel of Congress" further by way of song. The reference to the "gospel" refers to this song that Mini had composed during the Defiance Campaign:

Mayihambe le vangeli (Let this gospel spread)

Mayigqib ilizwe lonke (and be known through the whole world).<sup>13</sup>

On that fateful morning of November 6th, 1964, Ben Turok, who was a prisoner at Central Prison at the time of the imprisonment and execution of Mini and his comrades, testified about their singing. Turok was one of the few people who bears witness to the singing of the trio. Sechaba (journal of the ANC) accurately titled Turok's testimony "They Died Singing." He writes that early in the morning of Friday 6th November 1964, "Once again the excruciatingly beautiful music floated through the barred windows, echoing round the brick exercise yard, losing itself in the vast prison yards. And then, unexpectedly, the voice of Vuyisile Mini came roaring down the hushed passages. Evidently standing on a stool, with his face reaching up to a barred vent in his cell, his unmistakable base voice was enunciating his final message in Xhosa to the world he was leaving. In a voice charged with emotion but stubbornly defiant he spoke of the struggle waged by the African National Congress and of his absolute conviction of the victory to come. And then it was Khayingo's turn, followed by Mkhamba, as they too defied all prison rules to shout out their validations."<sup>14</sup>

Struggle and liberation songs are the heart-beat of any liberation struggle. South Africa is no exception. That is why during the very last few days of

the historic Rivonia Trial in June 1964, when it was expected that the accused leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) would receive was nothing less than the death sentence, Walter Sisulu planned to meet his fate singing. In *I Will Go Singing* (1997), he communicates the significance of singing and song in a conversation with George M Houser and Herbert Shore:

"And you were preparing yourself for the death sentence?"

“Balindle omama nobaba ‘ekhaya’ (They are waiting, our mothers and fathers, at home)”

Sisulu: "I was preparing myself for it. I wasn't going to be taken by surprise by anything as far as that is concerned. Albertina [Sisulu, his wife] came. The lawyers, especially George Bizos, said, prepare yourself. ... And Albertina was warning me to be strong, you see, on that situation because they were sure of the position."

"And what were you thinking as you prepared yourself for the death sentence?"

"I was thinking how I must go to the gallows. And I thought I must go to the gallows singing—for the sake of the youth who follow us, so they will know that we went without fear and that we had fulfilled our task in life. I would sing with a strong voice so that they would all hear. We must show that our death would not mark the end of the liberation movement, but would be an inspiration to our people in their

struggle. The rest would now be up to them. I was ready."<sup>15</sup>

That is why this book that started as a conversation with the ANC veteran and respected leader, Walter Sisulu, about his life in the struggle ended up with the title *I Will Go Singing*!

This extract from *I Will Go Singing* intimates the historical importance of the question of struggle songs in the liberation struggle of South Africa. The Equity Court case against the ANC Youth

League President, Julius Malema—and by extension, against the African National Congress and the millions of people who support it—makes it more urgent that we remember, in the words of Oom Gov, that "These Comrades went down alone protecting the movement so that it carried on the struggle." That struggle is ongoing. This is even more important now because this movement is the oldest political organisation and party in the African continent, and turns a hundred years on Sunday of January 8th 2012.

Whilst this historical overview of struggle songs concentrated only on the decades of the fifties and sixties, the songs could be traced as far back as before and after the formation of the African National Congress in 1912. The next article will focus on the struggle songs of the seventies and eighties decades in our struggle. ■

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\* For the publication of this article, I am grateful to Dr. Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu, the Executive Director of SADET Project (The Road To Democracy in South Africa); and Dr. Essop Pahad, and Chairperson of SADET Board of Trustees, who is also the Editor-in-Chief of *The Thinker*.