

Kader Asmal, chairman of the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, returned briefly to South Africa earlier this month after an absence of over 31 years. As well as fortifying his political beliefs, his visit revived for him the meaning of the word 'home'.

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Journey home to the home of apartheid

THE LAST hour of the long journey from London to Cape Town was the most difficult I have sat through in my life. The sense of excitement on going home after so many years to a country on the verge of a political breakthrough was combined with the difficulty of setting foot in a country with a highly conditional and insecure legality. Many of my compatriots remained in jail, and in a real sense, I was not free while the rest were in prison. And the heart of the entire country remains, as everyone knows, cordoned by apartheid.

It was entirely fitting that my arrival after all these years should be in Cape Town, because this was my last port of call when, as a schoolteacher in my early twenties, I left South Africa by boat for Southampton on December 20th, 1958. It was here that I had spent my last night in District Six, the "coloured" and Malay area of Cape Town with its exuberance and liveliness, music and gaiety, all alien to a stuffy "Indian" from Natal imprisoned by anxiety and very conscious that he was the only black on a very large Union Castle ship.

District Six was soon to disappear under the infamy of South Africa's Group Areas Act. And even in December 1958, amid the Christmas celebrations, it was clear that the blinds were being pulled down. The white universities could no longer take students from the majority of the population, the "coloureds" had lost their vote, and control over the Africans through the pass system and the emerging bantustans was virtually total. Dissent was suppressed and within a year the major organisations of resistance were to be banned and driven underground. The draconian "security" laws weaving through every part of life and touching on the most intimate aspects of personal relations made any return impossible.

Now, 31 years later, I was returning to a country where the ban against the African National Congress and other organisations had been lifted for over four months and political activity, at least in the cities, could now be undertaken, though the major repressive laws still remained in

place. On the very evening of my arrival, the régime announced that the state of emergency, which had been the cause of so much suffering and under which over 50,000 had been detained since 1985, was to be lifted in all parts of South Africa, except for Natal.

I was not in Cape Town as a tourist, or a visitor, or even on a "fact-finding" mission. These capacities would have violated my personal support for the UN-sponsored cultural boycott of South Africa which Mr Mandela had specifically highlighted only a few days earlier. Its retention is vital, together with economic, sports and military sanctions, if negotiations are to be undertaken meaningfully and seriously. With my colleagues in the Constitutional Committee of the ANC — the body set up by President Oliver Tambo five years ago to prepare the ground for a future constitutional dispensation for South Africa — we were to meet for the first time inside South Africa. We were therefore provided with temporary immunity by the régime. This did not preclude our chairman, Zola Skeyiya, from being detained at Johannesburg for over two days when he flew in from Lusaka.

As we emerged from customs in Cape Town, we were greeted by cheers from a crowd of artists and lawyers, among whom was the distinguished lawyer, Dullah Omar, a senior official of the United Democratic Front and the Mandela family lawyer. A little earlier, it had emerged at the hearings of the Harms Commission of Inquiry into the official hit-squad of the régime, the sinister Civil Co-operation Bureau, that Mr Omar had been singled out as a special target. Albie Sachs, another colleague on the committee, had not been as fortunate, as someone's order to blow him up in Maputo had been carried out. But Albie Sachs survived and was now in his home town. It was remarkable that so many of the people whom I met had been detained or imprisoned. In my home town of Stanger in Natal, for example, Justice Mpanza had spent a decade in what then was the hell-hole of Robben Island. Yet those who had made these painful sacrifices and blighted their careers greeted the returning exiles with warmth and enthusiasm and rejoiced in their work of solidarity overseas.

We were not simply integrated into their work: we were welcomed home.

But home is not simply a state of mind. On a wet and cold afternoon on my first day, I was asked what I would like to do in the few hours left before one of the first branches of the ANC was formally constituted in Athlone, Cape Town's "coloured" suburb. Outside the "grey" areas of Houghton and some of the cities, the territorial partition of South Africa is total. I therefore asked to be taken to the African townships of Guguletu and Langa and the so-called squatter camps of Crossroads and Khayelitsha.

Four years ago, over 30,000 Africans were forced by vigilantes, assisted by the police and soldiers, to move to Khayelitsha. Scores died in the violence, which shocked even South Africa. Only in South Africa could Khayelitsha be considered as an example of "urban renewal" as the shacks, lean-tos and cardboard houses are even more crowded together than in Crossroads. Thousands upon thousands live within sight of Table Mountain in degrading poverty. There is no evidence of drainage, lavatories or street lighting and the only sign of roadworks in Khayelitsha was a prominent notice warning motorists to beware of large potholes!

The soulless townships are paradises compared to these camps, which are the direct result of apartheid laws and practices. In no country in the world have I seen such degrading conditions. A few miles away, in "liberal" Cape Town, are the palatial houses and beautifully kept gardens of white South Africa, in Kalk Bay and Simonstown, the headquarters of the South African Navy which I visited, out of perversity, to see the effects of the arms embargo!

As a visitor, I walked in the townships and the squatter camps without any fear or trepidation. The resilience and the optimism of the ordinary people I met in the midst of squalor was striking. Sanctions did not bring about these blots in the physical and political landscapes; it was influx control, and apartheid exploitation. Without redistribution of wealth in a free South Africa, there will never be adequate housing, medical care, schooling and jobs for them. But some people want change in South Africa without any real change, such an



On his return to South Africa, Kader Asmal met 90-year-old Mrs Nokhanya Lutuli, and her son, Edgar. Mrs Lutuli's husband, Albert Lutuli, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, was "banned and harassed as president of the ANC" and "was my guide and political mentor."



Kader Asmal as he embarks on the liner "Edinburgh Castle" at Cape Town for Southampton on December 20th, 1958 . . . He was very conscious that he was the only black on a very large ship.

approach to be enshrined in the Constitution of a free South Africa, through the veto on any law affecting "group" rights, for which read racial rights.

These personal insights were fortified on my first evening when I was asked to speak at the launch of the ANC branch in Athlone. Hundreds of flag-waving and toyi-toying whites and blacks greeted "senior ANC" executive members, including the brilliant and articulate director of information and publicity, Dr Pallo Jordan, who went to school in the area. Two themes received the greatest applause. First, the need to maintain pressure on the apart-

heid régime; and second, the need for democracy to penetrate every aspect of the life of the ANC so that, in a country where democratic decision-making even for whites had been replaced by bureaucracy, the ANC, as the only representative organ to unite blacks and whites, could be a microcosm of a free South Africa.

Cheryl Carolus, the young and energetic woman who participated in the first round of the talks with the all-male, all-white representatives of the régime in May, enthused the audience with her vibrant presentation of the ANC's policy.

In the early hours of the next

morning, I paid a nostalgic visit to District Six. In the heart of Cape Town, only a few buildings remain of what was home to thousands. A few churches and a mosque, together with a monstrous Stalinist-style technical college for whites, litter the landscape of grassy mounds. A living community was destroyed in the name of apartheid and scattered to the bleak wet, sand-strewn parts of the Cape Flats, away from the gaze of white South Africa. If Crossroads is an error of omission, the destruction of District Six was a crude and violent statement of political and social vandalism motivated by racist ideology.

Most visitors to South Africa make the rounds meeting leaders of organisations. Over the past three years, I have had the opportunity of such exchanges in Europe and in the US. To meet ordinary people was therefore a bonus. There were many such opportunities, often moving ones.

On my second day in South Africa, 48 political prisoners from Robben Island and other prisons were released. One had served 18 years and others from two to 12 years. Meeting 28 of these was a revelation as it became clear that their activities, together with international pressure and the economic crisis, had brought about the present situation. Yet, they asked, if the De Klerk administration believed in normal political activity, why were there

ANC INTERIM COMMITTEE
STANGER BRANCH

INVITES THE PUBLIC TO AN

ADDRESS
BY
KADER ASMAL

M.A. LL.M. BARRISTER
(formerly of Stanger)

- ★ President of Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement
- ★ Founder Member of British Anti-Apartheid Movement
- ★ Senior Lecturer in Law, Trinity College, Dublin
- ★ Member of Constitutional Committee of The ANC

DATE : WEDNESDAY 13 JUNE 1990

TIME : 7:30 p.m.

VENUE : TOWN HALL, STANGER

ISSUED BY THE ANC INTERIM COMMITTEE,
14 JACKSON STREET, STANGER

Poster for an address by Kader Asmal to an African National Council meeting in his native Stanger.

still so many political prisoners; why have over 170 people been shot dead since his February 2nd speech; and why are there nearly 300 political trials under way?

My visit to the 90-year-old Nokhanya Lutuli was an act of homage. Her husband, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Albert Lutuli, banned and harassed as president of the ANC, was my guide and political mentor who instilled in me a vision of a non-racial South Africa. She continues to live in a modest bungalow near Stanger, on the north coast of Natal, with her son Edgar. Chief Lutuli's grave remains a focus of political pilgrimage and his family was proud that the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement instituted a Lutuli Memorial Lecture after his death in 1968.

Fear of Inkatha in Natal is pervasive and there is disquiet that the government not only does not disarm its forces but allows the Kwa Zulu police — actively involved, as a number of reports have shown, in murders and intimidation — is still allowed to operate openly. There are also extraordinary changes in what was formerly my little, cosy hometown. Not only is there a branch of NUMSA, the metal workers' union, but also an active interim committee of the ANC which organised a meeting for me attended by Africans and Indians.

Half-a-dozen armed policemen were at the door. To provide security or to intimidate? They were not present at the end of the meeting, so we concluded that security was not a primary consideration. Overwhelmed by the hospitality of family and the renewal of friendships, my address to the meeting drew lessons about the need to recognise the multicultural and diverse nature of South African society and the

imperative to exorcise all traces of racism in our behaviour.

Two final and random images. The first concerns the meeting with the 28 Robben Island prisoners when we met at the University of the Western Cape which was set up as part of the Verwoerdian concept of "bush colleges" for the blacks. UWC was to be for "coloureds", but it has betrayed the aims of its founders by becoming part of the democratic structure of the mass movement against apartheid, firmly rooting itself in the struggle. The affection shown by the former prisoners and by students for the university's rector, Jakes Gerwel, was genuine and palpable. UWC is no ivory tower. The government grant was therefore been cut by nearly a third.

Secondly, I now realise why so many of my Dublin-based Irish friends go "home" to the country towns where they were educated and where they were born. It is the easy familiarity of known sights, smells and acquaintances which metropolitan urban life can never replace. Walking down the main street of Stanger gave a reality to the statement of a Jewish-German when she returned to the German town of her grandparents who had all been exterminated by the Nazis: home is where you are known.

It is a cliché to say that South Africa is a beautiful, often achingly beautiful, country. I felt this especially when I first set eyes on the Drakeensberg range of mountains on my visit. As I left the airport in Durban to return to Dublin, I read a report in the *Natal Mercury* of a court case in which a 24-year-old white man was fined £1,000 (or two years in prison) for beating an Indian to death. *Plus ça change...*?