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Q & A with...

South Africa: Brothers in Arms - "I met Chris Hani around 1980"

Monday 16 July 2012, by [Amandla!](#), [NGCULU James](#) (Date first published: 13 June 2012).

James Ngculu joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) after the 1976 uprising of Soweto. He occupied a variety of posts within MK and spent most of his time abroad in exile, where he became one of Chris Hani's closest companions. After 1994, he acted as the Provincial Secretary of the ANC and as Provincial Chairperson of the Western Cape Province until 2008.

Amandla! (A!): What was your relationship with Chris Hani? Please share with our readers your work together and anecdotes that give us an insight into this remarkable revolutionary.

James Ngculu (JN): I was part of the post 1976 uprising' youth, and I got to interact with Chris during a transitional moment of my life. I met Chris around 1980, when he had left Lesotho to visit our camps in Angola. He was still young and energetic. It struck me how much of a great orator Chris was: he had the ability to interface between English, Sotho and Xhosa, and could reach out to people. We shared a mutual love for Cape Town, where Chris had done his law articles and where his father and grandfather resided. Cape Town was in his blood. Chris and I developed a strong friendship. Chris had a photographic memory and could remember your face and your name with precision, even if he had met you once. He was a fitness fanatic always swimming or running. Whatever the time of day and even in the tropical weather of Angola, Chris would run. Chris was also impatient. Though he had a degree, he never wanted to intellectualize the revolution. He was a practitioner. When it was time to enter Zimbabwe in 1967, he was the first to traverse the river. When Chris finished his sentence of three years in Botswana, he was shocked and hurt that no one had come to welcome him and the other Wankie Operation soldiers when they were released. It was this disappointment that pushed him to write the Wankie memorandum, in which he criticized the ANC leadership and others who were living comfortably in exile and who had increasingly developed a carefree approach to the situation in South Africa, bringing the ANC further and further away from the idea of armed struggle. It was brave of him to submit it, and Chris was never afraid of the consequences. The focus on armed conflict was receding and he thought that the memorandum could be a way to refocus the fight. In 1969, he didn't go to the ANC conference in Morogoro.

In fact, the leadership had suspended him. I think the memorandum is one of his biggest achievements. {{A!: What was the essence of his political ideas and of his revolutionary legacy?}} {{JN:}} IT is not well known that Chris was deputy Secretary General of the Communist Party at a very young age, in the 1970s. He was committed to the work of the SACP but he never thought of communism in the classical sense of it. He understood his village background and knew that communism wasn't to be found in theory only, in Marx and Engels or in revolutionary slogans. He placed the interests of the people first. His ideological foundation was Marx, but he didn't think that there would be a communist revolution tomorrow and a classless society the day after. He wanted to address the suffering and needs of his people. His conduct in the camps showed that he cared about people: he directed all his attention towards our well-being. Chris was against the stratification of leadership and that's how he became a hero for many of us. There was always a line to Hani's house, not his office; people would wait for hours to talk to him about their personal issues. Chris would be interested in a comrade not having shoes, in another wanting to see his wife. He was concerned with the humanity of a person, and he would facilitate for us to go see our girlfriends. He helped us survive the life of confinement in the camps. {{Many leaders of the ANC never appreciated Chris's humanity.}} There was one of the most violent mutinies in the MK in Luanda. The soldiers rejected every leader of the ANC, except Slovo and Hani. They were armed and angry. The only person who was allowed to enter their camp was Chris. He told them, "If you want to talk to me as members of MK, put your guns down. I won't talk to you with your guns in the air." Then they talked. Things were resolved. Chris was a decisive leader. {{A!: Is it true that said CH did not see himself holding political office? What role would he be playing today? JN:}} It's true. After the Durban Conference in 1991, there was an MK conference in Thohoyandou, Venda, where we all asked for Chris to remain as Chief of Staff of MK. Mandela was there, but we didn't want to listen to him. We wanted Chris, but he defied all of us. As a result, the headquarters of the SACP became a roof for many of us. It was a huge loss. Part of the problems of integration that arose for ex-soldiers could have been avoided if Chris had stayed in MK. The conditions were less than favorable when we tried to reintegrate into society. Many of us were the targets and subjects of court martials and harassment. In 1991 it was clear that Mandela was going to be elected. It was also clear that there was going to be a contest for the Deputy President between Chris and Thabo Mbeki. We were all sitting in a hotel room discussing the matter when Chris told us that whatever people thought, Thabo, as a leader of government and of the ANC, would trounce him as a leader. Many of us still insisted on him standing. A compromise was reached that Sisulu would run to avoid the contest. Thabo and Chris both declined, even though Chris was number one. If he had stayed, who knows what would have happened? Thomas Sankara said: "I want people to remember me as someone who tried to do good for humanity", and I think that would characterize Chris. He would have done good for humanity. There is so much excess today, greed and overindulgence that are antithetic to all the values that we stood and fought for. Even when we were in Angola, we all had the same allowances. There was a real egalitarian spirit. Now you see ministers with luxury cars and habits... These are the things that Chris would have rejected. {{A!: What would he make of the current situation in South Africa? What would concern him and what

would give him hope? JN:}} This excess would have concerned him. I doubt that some of the incidents happening today would have been tolerated if Chris was around. Chris lived in a working class area in Lusaka until he was forced to move for security reasons. He never had a private house; people could go in and out as they wanted. There are a lot of things with this government that would have worried him. Despite all of the apparent weaknesses of the ANC, I think that the good intentions are always there. At some point soon, there will be a self-corrective mechanism. Chris would have been the engine for it. {{A!: How do you think Chris would respond to The Spear controversy? JN:}} Chris wasn't a traditionalist. He was anti-tribal. He was married to a Sotho woman, with children who spoke Xhosa, Sotho and English. He always wanted people to read whatever they wanted and whatever magazine that came in front of them, like Drum. He would encourage us to read them, even if they were considered bourgeois'.

We approached this Spear painting in a way that is un-ANC. If you look at the full exhibit, Brett Murray besmirched the name of the entire organization, including Solomon Mahlangu. He changed the slogan, "you strike a rock, you strike a woman" to "you strike a rock, you encourage corruption"...

My point is that we've focused on the individual, on Zuma. We forgot about Mahlangu, about the slandering of the ANC Women's League's slogan. This cult of individuality is not something we should encourage because if left unchallenged, it will corrupt the entire ANC. Chris loved Latin and mythology and English.

If you look at the great Italian artists and their painting, they show a lot of important naked men. Should they be burnt? I don't think Chris would have thought so ... If you could hear him citing Marx and Shakespeare while mentioning the Greek gods, you would accept his intellectual pedigree. He would have never allowed people to mobilize in the hysterical way they did for a painting.

A!: Would Chris have wanted a more independent SACP from the Alliance?

JN: Certainly. if you look in to The SACP's history, it was tradition that the General Secretary would resign his other full-time positions. Moses Mahbida was the Secretary of the Revolutionary Council and deputy president of SACTU. When he became General Secretary in 1981, he resigned his positions. Joe Slovo resigned as Chief of Staff. When Chris was elected GS in 1991, he resigned from the NEC and from the NWC. He could have done it all but wanted to focus on the SACP. I doubt that Chris would have agreed with what we find today.

P.S.

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