

Ahmed Kathrada

by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

I chat with two young South Africans
 who discuss their favorite singers and their jobs,
 but when I mention Ahmed Kathrada
 who was close to Nelson Mandela
 their faces turn blank. I'm in the wrong
 generation. Who remembers this towering
 figure, Ahmed Kathrada,
 prisoner no. 468/64 locked in his cell
 from 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 a. m.?
 Because he is Indian he was allowed
 one pair of long pants and socks
 while Nelson Mandela was in shorts
 and remained barefoot in the biting cold
 of Robben Island. There were eight
 political prisoners besides them, four
 illiterate, but Ahmed said, "one
 to teach, one to learn." Who recalls
 that more than a quarter of a century
 they were at hard labor there with shovels
 and pick axes, yet planning the road
 to reconciliation. Meanwhile
 there were massacres, Sharpeville,
 with hundreds murdered, including children.
 Ahmed and Mandela had no books
 or newspapers but they were learning
 wisdom and endurance. When they faced
 President De Klerk, they bargained
 for a new South Africa
 and did not give in. They insisted on
 a country that is inclusive,
 the end of Apartheid. Mandela
 became President, Ahmed Kathrada
 served as Mandela's parliamentary counselor.
 Sixteen years have flown by,
 two million houses were built, but who
 remembers this man with
 his quiet dignity, educated in the school
 of hunger and abuse, who has risen
 above hatred and divisions,
 cities where adult servants
 were called "boy," or "girl,"
 where shacks in Soweto
 had neither water nor electricity
 and where tourists now flock?