Ahmed Kathrada in post-war Europe: Holocaust memory and apartheid South Africa (1951-1952)

Roni Mikel Arieli

To cite this article: Roni Mikel Arieli (2019): Ahmed Kathrada in post-war Europe: Holocaust memory and apartheid South Africa (1951-1952), African Identities, DOI: 10.1080/14725843.2019.1607718

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14725843.2019.1607718

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

Published online: 25 Apr 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 244

View Crossmark data
Ahmed Kathrada in post-war Europe: Holocaust memory and apartheid South Africa (1951-1952)

Roni Mikel Arieli

APARTHEID-STOP ERC Project and Mandel Scholion Research Center, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

ABSTRACT
This paper is part of a larger study exploring cultural and discursive performances of Holocaust memory in South Africa under the apartheid racist regime (1948–1994). During the years of apartheid rule, South Africans of diverse backgrounds regularly invoked the memory of the Holocaust. In his 2004 memoirs, the Indian South African anti-apartheid activist Ahmed Kathrada briefly narrates the course of his European odyssey (1951–1952), where he witnessed first-hand the destruction left by the Second World War and by the Holocaust in particular. Using Kathrada’s memoirs; an interview I conducted with him in August 2016, and archival records concerning the cultural events he attended while in Europe, I tease out Kathrada’s insights on the Jewish Holocaust through a distinctively internationalist perception of colonialism. In addition, I address specific threads of communist thought that shaped his worldview. Despite his communist background, records of his visits to the Auschwitz concentration camp and to the Warsaw Ghetto reveal Kathrada’s unique perception of the Holocaust – in marked distinction from Soviet approaches to the Holocaust and its memorialization. Moreover, an analysis of Kathrada’s public speeches delivered over the 1950s repositions Kathrada’s little known sojourn in Europe as central in shaping his insights regarding the consequences of racism. These insights, gleaned in Europe, are brought home to South Africa. Drawing on Michael Rothberg’s paradigm of multidirectional memory, this paper explores how Kathrada interweaves different narratives, structuring his own imaginaries and identities by negotiating between different practices of commemoration and memorialization, in a search for justice and solidarity, and as a means of articulating his own position as a victim of apartheid South Africa.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 December 2017
Accepted 24 July 2018

KEYWORDS
Ahmed Kathrada; apartheid; communism; Holocaust; multidirectional memory; transnationalism

Introduction

At a meeting held in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, by the Anti-Permit Committee, on the morning of November the 18th, 1956, the Indian South African youth leader, Ahmed Kathrada, delivered a speech containing the following statement,

I have seen European civilization and I want to say that what Dr. Malan is trying to impose upon the people of South Africa is not civilization at all…I have been to
Germany. I have seen what Hitler has done in Germany. I have been to the concentration
camps of Poland. I have been to these countries—Poland, where six million people were
killed by Hitler! In Germany itself, five million people were killed by Hitler!¹ I have seen
those things. I have studied those things; and whenever I went into a concentration
camp, my heart went back to the people of my country; to the people in South Africa
(AMKF 1.6: 60).

This statement was made a few months after Kathrada’s return from his first visit
outside of South Africa. On June the 14th, 1951, Kathrada left South Africa to serve as the
head of the Africa desk at the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) head-
quarters in Budapest, Hungary. During his visit abroad, he traveled through the Czech
Republic to Germany and Poland, where he witnessed first-hand the destruction left by
the Second World War. In a short account in his Memoirs (2004), Kathrada recalls the
remains of the Warsaw ghetto, the Auschwitz concentration camp, as well as the rubble
left in Dresden, Germany and Lidice, Czechoslovakia, to reflect on race, identity and
resistance. He also contemplates some of the international cultural events he attended
while in Europe, such as the East Berlin World Festival for Youth and Students (August 1951) and the Congress of the International Union of Students (IUS) held in
Warsaw (September 1951). Linked to such reminiscences, in ways yet to be discussed in
this paper, was Kathrada’s contemplation of the international gatherings as sites of
solidarity providing opportunities for inter-cultural interactions.

In Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization
(2009), Michael Rothberg steers the discussion of memory away from competitive
models, claiming that the dynamics of different historical memories are not necessarily
based on zero-sum struggles. Instead of competition between memories, he offers
a more flexible hermeneutic model, which he describes as ‘multidirectional.’ Holocaust
memory emerges as exemplary for Rothberg’s understanding of multidirectionality.

The emergence of collective memory of the Nazi genocide in the 1950s and 1960s takes
place in a punctual dialogue with ongoing processes of decolonization and civil rights
struggle and their modes of coming to terms with colonialism, slavery, and racism […]
Shared histories of racism, spatial segregation, genocide, diasporic displacement, cultural
destruction, and—perhaps most important—savvy and creative resistance to hegemonic
demands provide the grounds for new forms of collectivity that would not ignore equally
powerful histories of division and difference” (p. 22–23).

An examination of Kathrada’s statement through Rothberg’s paradigm raises several
questions: What is at stake here? What made it possible for Kathrada, an Indian
South African and a Muslim, to make these pronouncements regarding Jewish
suffering? What stands behind such invocations of memory and meaning, and
how can we see Kathrada negotiating between different forms of commemoration
and memorialization? To answer these questions, we need to chart Ahmed
Kathrada’s life narrative as well as the course of local and global events that led
him to this negotiation. This survey will better allow us to investigate Kathrada’s
observations concerning post-War Europe as reflecting a conflict of memories that
blend different histories of destruction, suffering and discrimination together with
the brutal reality of apartheid South Africa. In the first section of the article,
I describe various aspects of Kathrada’s early political background to highlight the
ideological baggage he acquired prior to his European odyssey and that he carried with him throughout its duration. In the remainder of the article, I analyze Kathrada’s various insights derived from his European visit, focusing on his reflections on apartheid South Africa, made in the shadow of the destruction and ruination that he had witnessed.

**Becoming communist: Ahmed Kathrada’s early political activity**

Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada was born on August 21st, 1929 in Schweizer-Reneke, a small, Afrikaner-dominated rural town about 240 miles from Johannesburg, to a religious Muslim family, of Indian descent (Kathrada, 2008, p. 20). Most Indians arrived in South Africa between 1860 and 1911 under labour contracts, to serve employers on stipulated conditions for five years. At the end of their contract period they were entitled to go back to India or to settle in a small area of Natal (Thompson, 2001, p. 99; Marx, 2009, p. 249). However, a minority of traders, mostly Muslims, who like Kathrada’s father, had come to South Africa independently, opened small shops (Thompson, 2001, p. 171; Kathrada, 2004, p. 20).

Stereotypes of the Indian merchant as dishonest, crafty, and exploitative were prevalent in South African society from the very inception of Indian settlement in the country. As historian Jon Soske argues, ‘The Indian was not just ethnically foreign, but embodied the increasing power of an alien mode of calculating and distributing wealth’ (Soske, 2018, p. 42). Although anti-Indian legislation had been imposed upon Indians at regular intervals since the late 19th century, the rise of Afrikaner right wing, proto-fascist organizations over the 1930s and 1940s provoked violent anti-Indian demonstrations across the country (Higginson, 2014, p. 25). The spread of extreme right-wing movements that nurtured the myth of Indian shopkeepers as exploitative, was inseparable from the Great Depression of 1929, and the resultant white poverty (Shain, 2015, p. 86). Such movements advocated displacing Indians from their position of economic privilege (Hyslop, 1995, p. 70).

While Kathrada describes his childhood in Schweizer-Reneke as ‘smooth, marked by the joy of major celebrations, and the warmth and friendship, the sense of community, of small-town life,’ he had distinct memories of the impact of segregation laws on race relations in the town (Kathrada, 2004, p. 22). He singled out, for instance, the ringing of the 9:00 p.m. curfew bell ‘signalling the hour after which Africans required a special pass to be on the streets’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 22). He also recalled that during the 1930s, his father acquired another house. Given the restrictions on land ownership by Indians, ‘the properties were [...] acquired in the name of a “Cape Malay” friend, whose “race group” had not been disqualified from owning residential premises or business sites.’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 21). Here, Kathrada refers to the Transvaal Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1932 and its subsequent amendments in 1934, 1935 and 1937, which limited Indian trading by preventing Indians from acquiring property outside designated areas (Appiah and Gates, 2005, p. 293).

Local laws of segregation also determined separate schools for separate races. In Schweizer-Reneke there was a school for black South Africans and a school for whites, but as an Indian, Kathrada could not attend either of them (Kathrada, 2008, p. 21). This political reality forced Kathrada to migrate to Johannesburg without his parents when
he was only eight years old. As he memorably put it: ‘politics dispatched me to the city and that is where I learned my politics at a very early age’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 21).

In 1937, while Kathrada was a pupil at Newtown Indian Primary in downtown Johannesburg, J. G. Strijdom, then the Transvaal provincial leader of the National Party, eliminated Jewish membership in his party, while adopting anti-Semitic and anti-Indian ideas from local proto-fascist propaganda efforts (Higginson, 2014, p. 326). These right wing nationalistic ideas gained more prominence after the 1938 ‘Great Trek’ commemoration. As historian John Higginson argues,

In the wake of the centennial commemoration of the Great Trek, a trail of anti-African, anti-Indian, and anti-Semitic flashpoints, usually carried out by younger members and ‘cheerleaders’ of the Ossewa Brandwag and South African Greyshirts, shadowed the ceremonial ox-wagons once they arrived in the western Transvaal and Pretoria.” (p. 25).

In 1939, when South African parliament decided to enter the Second World War on the side of the Allies, it also introduced the Asian Land Tenure and Trading Act, placing further restrictions on Indian residence. This resulted in a new Indian leadership evolving from the left, which was drawn to the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) (Soske, 2018, p. 81). The Indian South African activist, Yusuf Dadoo, was one of the first Indian leaders to join the Communist Party in early 1939. In his Memoirs, Kathrada refers to him as ‘a pivotal and revolutionary leader in South Africa’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 29) and recalls how he and his Johannesburg friends distributed political pamphlets and put up posters with anti-war messages, on his behalf (p. 31).

Following Dadoo, Kathrada was drawn into the Young Communist League (YCL) when he was just twelve (Maharaj, 2001, p. 91). In his memoirs, he stated that he had joined the YCL ‘not out of any intellectual appreciation of Marxism-Leninism or any intelligent understanding of its politics on South Africa . . . [but out of] the broad struggle against injustice and inequality, and for democracy and non-racialism’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 34). This statement is crucial for an understanding of Kathrada’s complex political identity, which was not limited to communism per se, but included diverse ideas drawn from various ideologies and traditions.

By the mid-1940s, however, Kathrada was already well-versed in communism and was admitted into the South African Communist Party (CPSA), which at that time followed the example of the British Communist Party and actively embraced culture as its main tool for mobilization and education (Sandwith, 2013, p.286–287). As Kathrada noted in our interview, it was at the Party meetings that he acquired deeper knowledge of Nazi Germany and the ongoing tragedy of European Jewry:

The Communist Party had such schools. Their speakers were not confined to South Africa. It was very internationalist. So, I learned at a young age, not to be confined just to South Africa. So that was really useful […] I became conscious of the world outside of South Africa, and that’s how one learned of Nazism and later on of course, of the Holocaust, all the things out there, the ghettos, you know? (M. A. Kathrada, Personal communication, 11 August 2016).

Kathrada’s account is compatible with the scholarly historiographic portrayal of the Communist Party of South Africa’s position on the war. Until June 1941, the CPSA rejected the war, claiming it was an inter-imperialist conflict, and focused on building a united front against the war that included the white and black working class (Drew,
1996, p. 34). The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed by the Soviets and the Germans in 1939 helped reinforce that stance. However, immediately after Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union on 21 June 1941, the Party shifted position and became a staunch defender of human liberty in the face of Nazi terror (Sandwith, 2013, p. 286; Drew, 1996, p. 35). As mentioned above, the rise of Nazism in Germany over the 1930s had seen an increase in anti-Semitic and anti-Indian sentiments in South Africa that was inspired by active Nazi propaganda (Furlong, 1991, pp. 144–150; Shain, 2015, pp. 42–44, 48–50). Although South Africa had joined the war against Nazi Germany in September 1939, opposition to the war was prominent in Afrikaner nationalist circles (Shain, 2015, p. 232). Indeed, Kathrada testified that the Communist Party’s anti-fascist message had a great impact on him, especially in light of right-wing Afrikaner support for Nazism at that time. Moreover, he asserted that the sights of war he witnessed ten years later, during his European odyssey, reinforced his anti-fascist tendencies. (M. A. Kathrada, Personal communication, 11 August 2016).

During this period, Kathrada became prominent as a youth leader. Over the mid-1940s, he worked fulltime in the offices of the Transvaal Passive Resistance Council. In his memoirs he states, ‘A mere twelve months after the Second World War ended, there was widespread expectation of a future in which freedom, equality and peace would flourish, and colonialism, racism and armed conflict would be no more.’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 41). The South African political circumstances of the mid-1940s, however, saw increasing segregation. The Sauer Commission, appointed by the National Party in 1946 to prepare its policy statement on the racial problem, treated Indians as ‘an alien, unassimilable element in South Africa,’ while simultaneously recommending ‘the rigorous segregation of the Coloured People, the consolidation of the African reserves, the removal of missionary control of African education, and the abolition of the Natives Representative Council and the representation of Africans in Parliament’ (Thompson, 2001, p. 185).

These circumstances had tremendous impact on Kathrada’s political development. In 1946, he was one of the organizers of the South African Indian Congress (SAIC) Passive Resistance Movement against the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act, also known as the ‘Ghetto Act,’ in protest against the restricted political representation afforded Indian South Africans and their confined living areas (Kathrada, 2004, pp. 43–44). The use of the term ‘ghetto’ in this context was undoubtedly charged with resonances of its use by the Nazi regime. In fact, this campaign frequently invoked the Nazi analogy, drawing connections between the local repressive legislation toward the Indians and elements of Hitler’s policy toward the Jews (Gilbert, 2010, p. 39). Moreover, several observers of mid-century South Africa have noted that the anti-Indian atmosphere echoed core tropes of anti-Semitism, evident in claims that ‘the Indian was, according to common saying, the Jew of Africa.’ (Soske, 2018, p. 43). Within this identification, Soske argues, ‘the Nazi Genocide served as a powerful point of comparison and rendered the situation of the Indian diaspora legible in terms of international discussions over human rights, minorities, and the cause of the Second World War.’ (pp. 85–86).

The general election in 1948 marked the beginning of a new era in South Africa, as the National Party under Dr. Daniel François Malan rose to power. The Nationalists election slogan was ‘apartheid,’ marking the radicalization of race-based laws. Kathrada recalls: ‘The legislation that followed might have been taken straight from Hitler’s Third Reich. After all, some of the most prominent members of the NP [National
Party] had unashamedly supported Nazi Germany.’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 60). In 1950, when the apartheid government introduced some of its most repressive acts such as the Suppression of Communism Act, the Immorality Act and the Group Areas Act, Kathrada enrolled at the University of Witwatersrand for a Bachelor of Arts degree. At that point, he had already learned about the atrocities of the Second World War through books, films and YCL lectures. However, in his memoirs he stated, ‘it is another thing entirely to enter the belly of the dead beast yourself and be surrounded by the voiceless bones of those it has devoured.’ (p. 88).

From Johannesburg to Eastern Europe: Imagining the Self through the Transnational

In 14 June 1951, Kathrada left South Africa and travelled through Livingstone in Zambia, Nairobi in Kenya, Wadi Halfa in Sudan, and Athens, Greece to Rome, London, Prague and Budapest, where he finally settled at the WFDY headquarters as the head of the Africa desk (Kathrada, 2004, p. 88).

While in Europe, Kathrada was exposed to lingering evidence of war-time destruction. In his memoir, he mentions his visit to Prague, where he first learned of the village of Lidice near Prague, which was destroyed by Nazi forces in reprisal for the assassination of Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich in the late spring of 1942 – an assassination carried out on behalf of the Czechoslovak government in exile.

Thoughts of the bloody and cruel retribution exacted by his [Heydrich’s] henchmen darkened the edge of my consciousness as I walked the city streets... Surveying the scene of such merciless destruction, I recalled how bravely Julius Fucik had continued to write his last words, almost up to the very moment of his execution. Fucik symbolized resistance to Nazism, and his words, published as Notes from the Gallows, took their place in a body of literature that would inspire future generations (Kathrada, 2004, p. 90).

The Nazis in Berlin eventually executed Fucik, an active member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia at the forefront of the anti-Nazi resistance, in September 1943. His text, Notes from the Gallows, written during his imprisonment in Prague, was smuggled out of prison and published after the war. Fucik became an icon of the Communist Party after 1948, when the communists used his text as evidence of their heroic resistance to Nazism (Graf & Suppan, 2010, p. 184). Though he did not explicitly recall this, it is possible that Kathrada was first introduced to Fucik’s text during his participation in the cultural activities of the South African YCL during the late 1940s, in the context of the construction of the communist narrative of World War II as a war against fascism.

In the international arena, after the war, perceptions of the role of the battle for Stalingrad and of resistance to Nazism in Western Europe and the USSR were intertwined (Kotek, 1996, p. 62–63). Thomas C. Fox (2004) argues that during the early post-War period, the communist narrative of the Holocaust was part of the master narrative of Marxism. Within this framework, antisemitism or any other ethnically or racially based forms of oppression were constructed as the product of the efforts on the part of the ruling classes to ‘divert the attention of the oppressed from their oppressors’ (Fox, 2004, p. 420). Fox demonstrates how the Soviet definition of fascism, which viewed fascism as an extreme form of capitalism, excluded the specificity of the Jewish victims. Even when
it did mention the Nazi murder of Jews, this was usually viewed as part of the catastrophe of the Great Patriotic War that derived from fascist racism (p. 421). Within this narrative, communists were classified as ‘Fighters against Fascism’ whereas Jews were classified as ‘Victims of Fascism.’

Kathrada’s adoption of this communist narrative, as we have seen with reference to his meditations on the Lidice massacre, was especially pertinent for sites of atrocities of the War that were not aimed at Jews in particular. This is also evident in Kathrada’s recollections of his visit to the German city of Dresden. Dresden was massively attacked by the Allies during four aerial bombing raids between 12–15 February 1945, in what was described as a ‘German catastrophe,’ with approximately 380,000 civilian victims (Benda-Beckmann, 2010, p. 11). During the first years after the war, the bombing was presented as a consequence of failed air protection and the aggressive war of the Nazi State. However, after 1948, on the eve of the Cold War, the Soviet bloc portrayed the bombing of Dresden as an act of terror and a war crime committed by the Western Allies against innocent German citizens. By emphasizing that the Red Army had been the only true liberator of Germany from Hitler’s fascism, the Soviet Union used the Dresden bombing to demonstrate the continuity of American aggression against the German population and as evidence of its imperialism (p. 35–36).

The sight of the ruined city made a huge impact on Kathrada. In his memoirs, he states, ‘for many years afterwards, the ruined town became synonymous in my mind with District Six, Sophiatown and other areas razed to the ground in the name of ideology.’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 91). As Kathrada testifies in his memoirs, this insight was made retrospectively. The Group Areas Act (No. 41) was passed in 1950, creating the legal framework for the government to establish segregated neighborhoods where only people of a particular race were able to reside (Thompson, 2001, p. 194). However, the Sophiatown forced removals took place only on 9 February 1955, when 2000 police officers forcefully moved the black families of Sophiatown to Meadowlands, Soweto (p.194). Moreover, the destruction of District Six, also under the Group Areas Act, would only be implemented in 1969, when the Indian, Black and Coloured members of the neighborhood were forcibly moved and their homes and businesses were destroyed (p.194). Sixty-three years after his visit, in his remarks on Dresden, the suffering of the South Africans who were evacuated from their homes merge with the suffering of the German citizens of Dresden. These reflections resonate with the Soviet narrative that frames the bombing of Dresden as an Anglo-American imperialist war crime. Despite their anachronism, Kathrada’s reflections can be read as a general critique of the inhumanity performed ‘in the name of ideology,’ namely imperialism, colonialism and totalitarianism.²

Kathrada’s anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist tendencies were formed during his membership of the South African YCL, and it is safe to assume that they were well maintained during his European odyssey and especially during his tenure as head of the Africa desk at the WFDY headquarters. WFDY was founded in London in November 1945 as the broadest possible international organization of the younger generation. Its chief objective was to prevent a resurgence of fascism and to outlaw war forever, thus reflecting the intertwined post-war anti-fascist perceptions of Stalingrad and the resistance to Nazism in Western Europe and the USSR (Kotek, 1996, pp. 62–63). Kathrada was also involved with the International Union of Students (IUS), established in August 1946.
in Prague to enlist students world-wide to confront political questions and in particular the problem of defending peace and freedom (pp. 86–87).

These two youth organizations were responsible for launching the World Festivals for Youth and Students as early as 1947. At the time of their establishment, the World Festivals were seen as important international cultural events that included a variety of cultural performances, including dance groups, choirs, dance and song soloists, sketches and so on, showcasing the national traditions and aspirations of young people from around the world (IISH WYFC, file Berlin, 1951: 1). Although South Africa never sent an official delegation to these festivals, local youth organizations sent a handful of representatives during the late forties and early fifties. South African representation, however, was mostly comprised of South African students studying abroad. On the preparation of the South African delegation to the East Berlin World Festival for Youth and Students in 1951, Kathrada recounted in an interview:

In the South African delegation, we were sixty members, most of whom were based outside of South Africa because there was a question of passports. I had a passport issued when the United Party was still in power in South Africa and it was a five-year passport, so when I went to Europe it was still valid. When the Nats [the Nationalists] came into power, passports became almost impossible, and we had to smuggle people out and all that. So fortunately, I had a passport and as I mentioned there was sizeable number of South Africans, black and white students that came to the Festival from London. Quite a number of them were already politically conscious, and they became more conscious at the Berlin festival (M. A. Kathrada, Personal communication, 11 August 2016).

A report of the International Committee of the Festival meeting in Berlin, from May 1951, reveals the presence of South African organizations such as the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress, the Union of African Youth, the Federation of Free Students, the Peace Committee, and the South African Indian Congress, on the festival committee (Berlinguer, 1951, May 19–20: 12). South African involvement in organizing the festival was also reflected in its official objectives, to provide ‘A broad basis for the rallying of youth. Neither the color of skin, nor the difference of opinions or religions represent an obstacle or a condition for the participation at the Festival. Black, white and colored from South Africa, Negroes and white in the United States, prepare in common their trip to Berlin.’ (IISH, WYFC, Box 1st – 7th Festivals 1941–1955, folder 3rd Festival Berlin, 1951: 5).

The festival opened on August 5th, 1951, and lasted until August 19th, with one-and-a-half million young Germans and more than twenty-five thousand delegates from one hundred and four countries attending (Kotek, 1996, p. 23–25). The South African cultural program included a mixed black and white South African choir which sang ‘the songs of the English and Boer population, as well as the beautiful songs of the Africans‘(IISH, WYFC, Box 1st – 7th Festivals 1941–1955, folder 3rd Festival Berlin, 1951: 21), in an attempt to reflect South African society as a whole. This utopian representation of a segregated society can be perceived as ironic in light of the cultural separation intrinsic to apartheid rule. However, it can also be viewed as a performance expressing hope for a more egalitarian society.

The Festival was presented as a non-political, primarily cultural and social event. In practice, however, it was clearly communist (Kotek, 1996, p. 189). Communist states subsidized the attendance of young people from Africa and Asia, in addition to
providing special trains and translating newspapers and magazines into up to eight languages, in an effort to promote an idyllic vision of socialism aimed at participants from the West, as well as the participants from the emerging postcolonial nations (Kotek, 1996, p. 190; Slobodian, 2015, p. 23–24). Kathrada recalls in his memoirs,

There were some moving events that I shall never forget, social gatherings where young people met and talked, sang, danced, ate, drank, kissed, embraced and pledged everlasting friendship. Thus Vietnamese met the French, Koreans talked to Americans, and Israelis consorted with Germans. In a gesture of solidarity, delegates sent postcards to Paul Robeson and Jomo Kenyatta, who personified the fight against racism and all forms of discrimination (Kathrada, 2004, p. 91).

Seen through Kathrada’s eyes, the festival was a unique opportunity for inter-cultural interactions, where participants from the Global South were able to criticize their colonizers, and Israeli Jewish survivors were able to confront their German executioners. This depiction of colonized people and of Holocaust survivors as victims of the destructive forces of racism provides a glimpse into the ways in which Kathrada wove disparate traumatic histories into the broad struggle against injustice and inequality. This reflection on the festival gathering alludes to Kathrada’s later adoption of the particularistic Jewish narrative of the Holocaust, as we shall see in his contemplation of the sites of Jewish suffering such as the Warsaw Ghetto and the Auschwitz concentration camp. It reflects a marked departure from the Soviet narrative described above, which argued that people died during the Holocaust not because of their race, but because they were opposed to fascism.

Kathrada’s departure from the Soviet narrative of the Holocaust is reinforced in his narration of his visit to Poland, after the East Berlin festival was over. He was invited to participate in the Warsaw meeting of the IUS, held from August 31 to 6 September 1951 and travelled the city and its surroundings in the weeks prior to the event (Kathrada, 2004, p. 91). It was during that short period that he visited the Warsaw Ghetto and Auschwitz concentration camp. In his memoirs, he reflects on the enormous impact of the sights he had witnessed:

When we went to what had been the Warsaw Ghetto, I was reminded of the Nazi atrocities in Czechoslovakia. The Jews who rose up in Warsaw had been crushed as ruthlessly as the villagers of Lidice. Confined to an area of the city behind a wall eighteen kilometers long and almost three meters high, the beleaguered Jews had been warned by one of the rare escapees from Treblinka that extermination waited at the end of a nightmarish rail journey in closed cattle cars. Led by Mordecai Anielewicz, the young and the brave rose up against their captors on 19 April 1943. By 8 May, the uprising had been crushed, and rather than be taken prisoner, Anielewicz and others took their own lives...When I visited the site of this blot on humanity, only a modest monument marked the murder of tens of thousands of Jews and paid tribute to the handful who fought back and died. (Kathrada, 2004, p. 92)

Kathrada’s encounter with the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1951, and his detailed description of the Jewish uprising points to his perception of the Jewish tragedy in Europe as a point of inspiration. While Kathrada’s memoirs specifically describe the Warsaw Ghetto victims as Jews, he also recognized the non-Jewish victims of Nazi atrocities, including the inhabitants of the Czechoslovakian village of Lidice, whom he positions as central to his recollection of his visit to Prague. Kathrada points to similarities between the story of the crushed resistance of the Warsaw Ghetto Jews and the
story of the persecution and massacre of the inhabitants of Lidice. For him, emphasizing the stories of heroic resistance to the Nazis expresses his universal perception of the cost of the war, although these universal perceptions depend to a large extent on the particular. By recognizing the specifically Jewish identity of the victims of the Warsaw ghetto, but by positioning their heroic resistance and tragic death alongside those of the victims of Lidice, Kathrada retains some elements of the Soviet narrative of the war, but abandons others, in order to reflect on his own struggle in South Africa.

Kathrada testified that his visit to the Auschwitz concentration camp was an experience that made an indelible impression on him. In 1947, the Polish government declared Auschwitz-Birkenau a memorial site at which ‘Poles and citizens of other nationalities fought and died a martyr’s death’ (Steinlauf, 1997, p. 69). The International Auschwitz Committee, comprised of survivors and relatives of victims, was dominated by veterans of the largely Communist Auschwitz underground. This committee decided to turn over the barracks in the original work camp area to twenty countries for use as ‘national pavilions.’ One of these structures became a ‘Jewish pavilion’ that was usually locked and opened only on special occasions (p. 70). Auschwitz was exhibited as a site of Nazi terror and international martyrdom (p. 161). It was ‘squarely Polish from its inception, but the national narrative was told in the Socialist mode and according to Socialist parameters’ (Zubrzycki, 2006, p. 103). As the Jewish extermination was forced into the background, the extent of Polish suffering, as well as the role of the heroic liberating Red Army, was foregrounded.

The (civic-socialist) nationalist appropriation of the site went hand in hand with the Socialist narrative of World War II in general . . . People died there not because of their ethnic origins or ‘race,’ as defined by Nazi ideology, but because they were opposed to Fascism, an evil political and economic system (p. 105).

Kathrada writes of Auschwitz, ‘I could never obliterate the sight of the trench in which dogs mauled and savaged people to death; the gas chambers and incinerators; the lampshades made of human skin, the pillows stuffed with human hair’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 92). He found Auschwitz to be a ‘poignant reminder to mankind of the evils of racism,’ and was overcome with emotion ‘as [he] walked on the fragments of human bones littering the street near the incinerators’ (p. 92). In his interview, Kathrada mentioned a friend named John who accompanied him on the Auschwitz visit. He could not recall John’s last name, though he remembered that he was an Afrikaner student studying in one of London’s universities.

I forgot his surname. His parents were Nationalists, and Nationalists were pro Hitler. The boy had broken away from that because he was a student in London, where he became politically aware. Outside of South Africa, his whole attitude had changed and of course, when he went to Europe and experienced firsthand what racism meant. It was a lesson for him, and of course, Auschwitz was a lesson for all of us (M. A. Kathrada, Personal communication, 11 August 2016).

This recollection serves as another indication of Kathrada’s perception of the South African Nationalists’ racism as inseparable from their pro-Nazi tendencies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Kathrada believed that the Jewish genocide constituted an important lesson for humanity and bore particular relevance for his own country. Thus he ‘carefully collected a handful of bone fragments,’ bringing them back to South Africa to serve as stark
reminders of racism’s consequences (Kathrada, 2004, p. 92). In an ironic twist, the South African police discovered these bones during a raid on Kathrada’s flat a few years later. When Kathrada explained their provenance, ‘one of the policemen callously remarked: “Dit was seker net Jode nê?” [“They were probably just Jews, not so?”]’ (p. 92). Although Kathrada wrote his memoirs decades after his European odyssey, his description of these experiences in 1951 remains deeply emotional. Collecting bone fragments from Auschwitz – this ‘reminder of the consequences of racism’ – brought home to Kathrada the parallels between the Holocaust and the possible future consequences of apartheid in South Africa. Moreover, it appears that, although the Auschwitz memorial site was constructed to reflect the communist narrative of the war, Kathrada’s feelings about the camp were more consistent with the Jewish narrative with its emphasis on Jewish suffering, persecution and extermination.

Kathrada returned to South Africa in May 1952, determined to participate actively in the struggle against apartheid. He immediately became involved in organizing of 1952 Defiance Campaign against six apartheid laws, and was one of twenty defendants, including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, who were sentenced to nine months suspended sentence (Kathrada, 2008, p. 21).

On a winter morning in September 1952, Kathrada, stood on the podium at the Trades Hall in Johannesburg, holding a bottle full of human bones he had collected in Auschwitz, and addressed the audience of the African National Congress Youth League.

People are fighting for freedom in the whole world. I was in Europe a few months ago and there saw numbers of human bones lying about the country, bones of Jews that Hitler killed because he accused them of being communists. They were not communists; Malan is now following the example of Hitler by arresting our leaders (AMKF 1.1. 1952–1954: 4–5).

This speech, delivered only a few months after Kathrada’s return from Europe, provides an accurate and contemporaneous indication of his perception of the Holocaust. On the one hand, he specifically refers to the Jews as Hitler’s victims. Simultaneously, however, in noting that Hitler accused the Jews of being communist, Kathrada departs from the Jewish narrative of the Holocaust. While the Jewish narrative places anti-Semitism at the center of Nazi ideology, Kathrada’s observation implies that Nazi ideology was motivated by anti-communism, a position more compatible with the Soviet narrative of the war. Moreover, by stating that the Jews were not communists, Kathrada emphasizes that Hitler’s Nazism enlisted communism as a means for the elimination of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. As we shall see below in other addresses made by Kathrada during the 1950s, this accusation enabled him to draw parallels between Hitler and Malan’s policy of invoking the struggle against communism in order to suppress its opposition.

At his address to the Anti-Permit Committee on 18 November (Kathrada, 1956), cited above, Kathrada continued to draw connections between Hitler and Malan’s anti-Communist agenda:

I said to you before that Dr. Malan tried to imprison our leaders under the Suppression of Communism Act. In 1933 Hitler also had the Suppression of Communism Act in Germany. It was an Act to suppress communism. It was an Act, which killed millions and millions of innocent people who fought for freedom! (AMKF 1.6: 60).
In this statement, Kathrada repeats his claim that the Third Reich’s Suppression of Communism Act was Hitler’s means of executing millions of people. He neglects to designate the victims’ specifically Jewish identity, and, therefore, unintentionally obscures the racial dimension of the Nazi killing. However, Kathrada’s comparison between the Nazi Enabling Act of March 1933, which allowed the Nazis to effectively determine who was an opponent, and the apartheid Suppression of Communism Act of 1950, is not inaccurate. According to statistics held by the Nazis, the most common form of opposition to Nazism came from those ideologically opposed to the Nazis, primarily the communists and socialists. As in the South African case, once one was labelled as opponent of the government, arrest was inevitable.

Notwithstanding the similarities between Nazi and apartheid policies, Kathrada’s occlusion of the Jewish identity of the Nazi victims can be interpreted as a testament to his adoption of elements of the Soviet narrative of the war. However, later in the same address, Kathrada makes a comparison between Hitler’s *Lebensraum* Policy and Ghettoization of the Jews in Europe, with Malan’s Group Areas Act (1950), while referring specifically to the suffering of Hitler’s Jewish victims. He states:

> Dr. Malan has given you the Group Areas Act. Hitler also had the Group Areas Act for the Jewish people. He also said that the Jews must stay on one side; and when the Jews were put on one side, what did Hitler do? I remind you of the Warsaw Ghetto. In the Warsaw Ghetto Hitler sacrificed two square miles of land where the Jews had to live; A wall [was constructed] all-round the ghetto and all round that wall he placed electricity – live electricity – electric wires! and the Jews who wanted to leave those ghetto, the Jews who wanted to get into those ghettos had to get a pass like our people had to get passes in this country! (AMKF 1.6: 60).

This description of the Jewish life at the Warsaw Ghetto is far more specific and draws attention to the similarities between the racially based restrictions imposed on Jews by the Nazis and those imposed on Indian, black and Coloured South Africans by the apartheid government. While, it is clear that Kathrada was deeply invested in communism, his specific references to Jews are yet another indication that he did not completely adopt the Soviet-communist narrative of the Holocaust, as he enlists the memory of the racial persecution of European Jews in order to talk about his own struggle against the racist apartheid policy. The rhetorical value of this comparison for Kathrada is important here. As a youth leader, Kathrada hoped that the memory of an event that was comparatively recent would be an asset for mobilizing his listeners into action. Most of them had lived through the war, and had been subject to dual propaganda from those opposing the war and those for it. Moreover, most of the youth Kathrada addressed in his speeches were politically involved in various organizations and were probably familiar with the frequent analogy made between apartheid and Nazism, in the publications of the anti-apartheid movement. Kathrada built on this familiarity in order to galvanize individuals into action.

**Conclusion**

Kathrada’s insights brought home from his European odyssey deeply influenced his struggle against apartheid. While traveling through different sites and cities in Europe, Kathrada also traveled through narratives, structuring his own imaginaries and identities by negotiating between different practices of commemoration and memorialization,
drawing fragments from sometimes contested collective memories, in a quest for justice and as a means for addressing his own situation as a victim of apartheid South Africa. As this paper demonstrated, an analysis of this unique journey profits from routing it through Rothberg’s paradigm of multidirectional memory.

Rothberg argues against the idea that speaking of the Holocaust prevents or blurs the articulation of other atrocities such as slavery or colonialism. It is true that the histories of apartheid and Nazism differ dramatically and significantly from each other. Although both Nazism and apartheid were racially based regimes, the first moved toward extermination, while the other promoted radical segregation. Kathrada was surely aware of these differences. At the same time, we have seen how he negotiates with the construction of each of these forms of repression. While Kathrada invokes various comparisons between the two, he also pays attention to historical specificity. His fashioning of his identity as a political activist and his perceptions of justice are routed through comparative remembrance that does not bypass singularity.

An essay written by Rothberg, entitled ‘Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge,’ enables us further to reflect on the place of South Africa in contested memories of racial conflict in the aftermath of the Second World War. Whereas Rothberg’s 2009 volume Multidirectional Memory focuses on ‘transnational militant and minority articulations of the past’ (Rothberg, 2013, p. 40), his later essay turns to a different archive, which he describes as an archive of ‘implication.’ Here Rothberg seeks ‘to explore how multidirectional memory works in cases of complicity or responsibility where the subjects of remembrance are ethically implicated, however ambiguously, in the realms of a dominant or even perpetrator culture, without themselves being perpetrators.’ (p. 40).

In his essay, Rothberg focuses on representations of the South African mine as it was circulated by two contemporary writers and artists, the German author W. G. Sebald (in his prose fiction Austerlitz (2001), which references the Jewish South African author Dan Jacobson’s Heshel’s Kingdom (1998)), and the Jewish South African visual artist William Kentridge. He demonstrates how in both cases, the South African mine is invoked by white and Jewish South Africans, that is Jacobson and Kentridge, with references to the Nazi Genocide, to reveal how the ‘performance of multidirectional memory can play a role in coming to terms with and mapping undesirable forms of implication in historical trauma.’ (p. 42).

While Rothberg’s writing on apartheid South Africa focuses on ethically implicated figures, his oeuvre does not adequately address what he defines as ‘transnational militant and minority articulations of the past’ (p.40), in the South African context. This article contributes to redressing this absence by focusing on the unusual story of a Muslim South African activist, who grow up in anti-Indian surroundings, was influenced by communism, and speaks directly and eloquently of Jewish suffering. The case of Ahmed Kathrada provides a novel site for reflection on the intersections between various articulations of collective memory. Moreover, reading Kathrada’s reflections, recollections and speeches from the early 1950s in the South African context, has significant historical and theoretical implications for what we have already addressed as a leitmotif of Rothberg’s intervention, namely the understanding of ‘the emergence of Holocaust memory and the unfolding of decolonization as overlapping and not separate processes,’ as Rothberg claims (Rothberg, 2009, p. 200). My analysis of this context contributes to the understanding of how South
African communists reflected their understanding of Soviet historiography of World War II with their own emphases drawn from the ongoing practices of resisting apartheid.

By demonstrating Kathrada’s strategic navigations between memories, this article reveals the field of forces in which he was positioned. His perception of victimhood and suffering evolved and was shaped through the filters of Cold War reality and in accordance with his political aims, in a genuine quest for international solidarity with the liberation struggle of black, Coloured and Indians in South Africa. While Kathrada’s transnational perceptions were shaped by his immersion in the Communist Party from adolescence onwards, his descriptions of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Auschwitz concentration camp reveal his negotiation with a completely different constructions of memories. These allow him to draw imaginative links between apartheid South Africa and Nazi Germany, by emphasizing the Jewish catastrophe of the Holocaust.

As I describe elsewhere, Kathrada’s transnational perceptions continued to play a significant role in his struggle against apartheid, even during his long imprisonment on Robben Island. In July 1963, the police descended on Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, a Johannesburg suburb where Kathrada and other banned persons had been meeting. This led to the infamous ‘Rivonia Trial,’ in which eight of the accused were charged on two counts of sabotage and were sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labor (Maharaj, 2001, p. 96). Kathrada spent over twenty-six years in prison, one in detention in Pretoria, eighteen on Robben Island, and seven in Pollsmoor (Kathrada, 2008, p. 19). During his imprisonment, Kathrada read The Diary of Anne Frank (Kathrada, 1952) and recorded thirteen inspiring quotations from the text in his notebooks (Kathrada, 1964–1982). Kathrada’s quotations from Frank’s diary reveal the imaginative links drawn by him between his own struggle of personal imprisonment and those of Anne Frank. They also reveal Kathrada’s reflections on his situation as an Indian South African.

In the first fully democratic election in South Africa, in 1994, Kathrada was elected a Member of Parliament and was appointed Parliamentary Counsellor in the office of President Nelson Mandela (Kathrada, 2008, p. 19). It appears that Kathrada’s formative insights from his short visit to Europe continued to play a central role in his struggle against discrimination in post-apartheid South Africa. After retiring from politics in June 1999, he served as the chair of the Robben Island Museum until 2006. In 27 October 2013, he launched the international campaign for the release of Marwan Barghouti and all Palestinian political prisoners from Robben Island. In his Memoirs, he stated, ‘One hopes that in dealing with the long-suffering people of Palestine, the leaders of modern-day Israel find enough resonance with the treatment of their fathers and grandmothers to act humanely and with compassion.’ (Kathrada, 2004, p. 92).

Enlisting the integrated comprehension, he had gained from his lived experiences as a young internationalist, Kathrada expresses a direct call for the Jewish state, founded in part by victims of the Holocaust, to awaken to, and express solidarity with, the enduring suffering it has caused the people of Palestine. His call implies that the establishment of Israel has rendered the formerly persecuted European Jews the persecutors of the Palestinians. However, Kathrada’s formulation emphasizes Jewish suffering during the Holocaust as a motive for solidarity with Palestinian suffering, rather than directly attacking the Israeli occupation. Kathrada’s capacity to reference Israelis as past victims of racism and discrimination, in a plea to halt their aggression towards the Palestinian people, emerges from the life experiences he accumulated, as we have highlighted in the discussion above.
As his involvement with Palestinian solidarity shows, Kathrada played a major role in South Africa’s liberation struggle without abandoning his internationalist orientation. Filtered through the reality of the Cold War, his capacity to convert personal experience into powerful political imaginaries became a defining component of his activism, shaping his struggles for justice and against racism in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Ahmed Mohamed Kathrada died on 28 March 2017, at the age of 87. The principles which he embodied in his life and writings continue to enrich the categories through which we imagine social change.

Notes

1. Some clarifications are needed for Kathrada’s statement above. While it might appear that Kathrada claims that the number of Jewish victims of the Holocaust is 11 million (6 million in Poland and 5 million in Germany), this should be considered an inadvertent mistake on his behalf. It is safe to assume that those numbers reflect the estimated numbers of victims of the war (military and other civilian deaths, including Jews).

2. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for drawing this anachronism to my attention.


Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Prof. Louise Bethlehem, Prof. Amos Goldberg, Dr. Karin Berkman, Dr. Rotem Giladi and Dr. Tal Zalmanovich for their helpful suggestions regarding this paper. For their assistance and insight, the author would also like to thank Kier Schuringa, anti-apartheid and southern Africa archivist, the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam; André Mohammed, Historical Papers Coordinator, the University of Western Cape Robben Island, Mayibuye Archives; Jan Erik Dubbelman, Head of International Department of the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam; Tali Nates, Director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre; Neeshan Balton, Director, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation; and Yasin Moosa, Archivist, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation. The author would also like to thank the School of Education Ethics in Research Committee at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for providing the ethical approval for the personal interview conducted by the author with Ahmed Kathrada on 11 August 2016 (approval number 13902/2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement no. 615564.

Notes on contributor

Roni Mikel Arieli is Scholion Post-Doctoral fellow, as a member of the research group "In Someone Else’s Shoes- An Interdisciplinary Research Group for the Study of Empathy in History, Society, and
Culture," at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She wrote her PhD dissertation at the department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, under the supervision of Prof. Louise Bethlehem and Prof. Amos Goldberg. Her research explores the memory of the Holocaust in South Africa during the apartheid years (1948–1994) and during the transition to democracy. She is a member of the 2014 class of the Hoffman Leadership and Responsibility Fellowship program and holds a PhD fellowship in the European Research Council (ERC) project 'Apartheid - The Global Itinerary: South African Cultural Formations in Transnational Circulation 1948–1990' under the direction of Prof. Louise Bethlehem.

References


