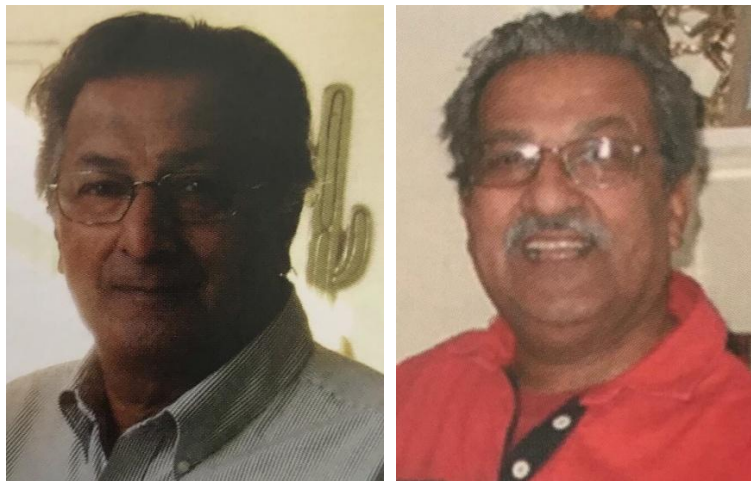


## **Vassen Brothers: Daytime Teachers, Night-time Combatants**

**(Ismail Vadi)**

The brothers Tommy and Bobby Vassen were activists in the Transvaal Indian Congress (TIC). Both were teachers who went on to play leading academic roles in exile, the former in the United Kingdom and the latter in the United States. Both were recruited into the ANC's armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), although the one did not know that the other was a member of MK and vice versa. They played dual roles of being passive teachers by day and active combatants at night.



Robert and Tommy Vassen

Tommy Vassen taught in Lenasia in the early 1960s. He was an ANC veteran, and a member of the South African Communist Party (SACP) and the British Anti-Apartheid Movement. He was born in Fordsburg on 27 January 1936, the eldest son of Rangee and Tozey Vassen. It was here that political friendships were formed and resistance to apartheid forged, particularly with activists such as Ahmed Kathrada, Paul Joseph and the Chiba brothers. Tommy attended the Bree Street Indian Primary School, followed by his secondary education at the Johannesburg Indian High School. It was in high school that he met his wife, Dela, a fellow teacher.

After completing high school in 1955, Tommy enrolled for a teacher's training course at the college in Fordsburg. Two years later, he started his career in Kliptown, historically known for the adoption of the Freedom Charter. His first teaching experience had a profound impact on his life as he was appalled by living conditions of his students in the township. When the first primary school was established in Lenasia, Tommy was appointed as a teacher at the school.

Tommy was recruited in 1962 into MK. Under the leadership of Abdulhay Jassat, his MK unit scouted for potential government targets to sabotage. When Abdulhay was arrested, Tommy went underground with his cousin, Herby Pillay. After a few months in hiding, it was judged safe for Tommy to emerge, with Tommy having to

explain his long absence from school to apartheid education authorities. As a result, he was demoted and offered a temporary position.

On 14 April 1965, Tommy went into exile and settled in London. A year later, Dela and her children joined him, and the family had to make a new beginning in life. Tommy was employed as a teacher in 1966, and he steadily rose in rank as he received several promotions, which included a consultancy and headship. Tommy renewed his political activism within the SACP and ANC in England, and he represented both organisations at international conferences and solidarity workshops.

Returning to South Africa after twenty-five years of exile in 1990, Tommy Vassen remembered Ahmed Kathrada's warm embrace upon his arrival. Tommy described the ANC as a family that gave his life purpose and direction, saying "It gave us the noblest cause that humanity can undertake - to break free from the shackles of greed and power and determine our own destiny." Tommy Vassen passed away on 28 September 2022 in East Sussex, London, aged 86.

Robert "Bobby" Vassen was Tommy's younger brother. He was born on 27 April 1938 in Fordsburg. Like his brother, he attended the Bree Street Indian Primary School, and later matriculated at the Johannesburg Indian High School. It was here that he became politically conscious as all his teachers were Whites and he was forced to learn Afrikaans. He loved English literature saying, "We had no problem learning and memorising Keats, Shelley and Shakespeare, but we drew the line when it came to memorising Afrikaans poetry."

Bobby joined the Transvaal Indian Youth Congress at the age of seventeen and struck up political relationships with fellow activists such as Essop and Abdulhay Jassat, Suliman "Babla" Saloojee, Moosa "Mosie" Moolla, Govind Chiba and Billy Nannan. At Wits University where he was studying for a BA degree, he met Ursula van Zyl, whom he married in 1963. Ursula worked as librarian in Fordsburg.

Having graduated from Wits in 1961, Bobby was employed as a teacher at the Waterval Indian Group 2 School, located on Mia's Farm, teaching English and Race Studies. He disliked intensely teaching Race Studies as it distorted the reality of life under apartheid and served to reinforce the inferiority of Blacks in South Africa. In 1962, Bobby was recruited into MK by Laloo "Isu" Chiba.

In October 1964, when it was clear that the security police were on his trail, Bobby left South Africa for London. He taught at the Wimbledon Boy's School. Bobby was active in the ANC's South London Unit. He resigned from his teaching post in 1970 and joined Eurocentres, a private organisation of language schools. Through this venture he was appointed as principal of one of the four largest schools in London.

In 1990, he was appointed as an Associate Professor and the Director of the English Language Centre at Michigan State University.

In 1999, Bobby edited "Letters From Robben Island: A Selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989", which was published by Michigan State University Press. The book contains a selection of 86 of the more than 900 pieces of correspondence Ahmed Kathrada wrote during his 26 years on Robben Island and at Pollsmoor Prison. Some were smuggled out by friends; others were written in code to hide meaning and content from prison censors. These are among Kathrada's most touching and eloquent communications from the dungeon of apartheid. Robert Vassen passed away on 14 March 2016 in London.

"Retired scholar Robert D. Vassen talks about his upbringing in South Africa and his involvement in African National Congress", <https://d.lib.msu.edu/vvl/273>, accessed on 11 May 2023.