

Fighting to keep our Memories alive

It is an honor and a privilege to be here with you today to present this paper on fighting to keep our memories alive, an issue which I believe holds significant relevance to South Africa today.

As the Czech Novelist Milan Kundera said “The Struggle of man against power is the struggle of Memory Against Forgetting”. We are indeed in danger of forgetting much of the history of our

struggle against apartheid. Many names and the roles they played during this multi-faceted story are being forgotten or neglected, which tends to happen in post-revolutionary situations.

Therefore the question today is how do we prevent and stop those names and those heroic and often sacrificial roles from being airbrushed out of our historical narrative.

The fact that I am here talking to you on this subject matter is an indictment of the malaise that has taken root in South Africa today with regard to this.

As I think of where South Africa has come from I am reminded of the book High Road Low Road by Clem Sunter a leading Scenario Planner. In it he sketches out two scenarios's facing South Africa as it emerged out of 46 years of apartheid oppression. Ironically however he did not address the threat we are now facing today and

that is the real danger of forgetting. Of forgetting what South Africa endured and the hard fought sacrifices made to secure the freedoms we enjoy today.

It sounds bizarre to think that as a fledgling democracy, 17 years young, we should be concerning ourselves with the thought and concern that the memory of our past, which is growing ever tenuous as the thread that links and connects us slowly fades from our socio-political landscape, consciousness and memory.

In fact we forget that the twenty-something's of today have no personal memory of the struggle. They were not born or were mere toddlers, when Nelson Mandela and the Rivonia Trialists were still in prison.

This stark reality was thrown into sharp focus for me when I began to consider the topic to be addressed here. The question posed was around what kind of roles can institutions and museum's play in the fight/struggle for human rights. This

got me to reflect on the prevailing socio-political climate in South Africa today.

In assessing and analyzing the question I became acutely aware that the topic/question needed to be redefined for the South African context. South Africa of 2011 has achieved and secured universal democracy, freedoms and human rights through a hard fought struggle, a struggle for liberation and justice.

The issue facing South Africa today is not about the fight/struggle to secure human rights, but rather the struggle against the memory against forgetting, the struggle to ensure that as a nation we entrench and respect our human rights, our Bill of Rights and our Constitution. Thus our struggle today is not about securing human rights but rather to ensure that the struggle and sacrifices endured are not forgotten.

We live in a global world where we forget quickly. We are often told to “move on”, that somehow there is a dialectical contradiction

between memory and progress, that in order to progress we must “forget” the past.

It is a bizarre twist of fate, that memory is considered a hindrance to progress. However it is the past that shapes and informs our today, for without the memory of the past we may find ourselves lost in the present.

As Pierre Nora, *Between Memory and History* says it is essential to know to whom and to what we owe our existence. Thus knowing how our

human rights came about and who played a role in making them possible gives meaning, substance and validity. Thus knowing adds to the fight against forgetting.

As time passes it is easy to forget where we have come from and what we, as a people have endured. With each generation the gap gets wider and the importance of our past begins to fade from the socio-political landscape. In *Between Memory and History* Pierre Nora says “When memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the

responsibility to recapture it through individual means.” It is for this very reason that sites like Liliesleaf are essential as they aim to preserve the memory and legacy to ensure we don’t forget, and in so doing keeping the memory and legacy alive.

Liliesleaf commemorates a strategic and seminal point in South Africa’s history and represents a beacon on the national and international landscape of human memory.

Liliesleaf formed a crucible of the liberation movement and became a distinctive place of

memory for definitive leaders such as Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, and those associated with Liliesleaf and the liberation movement and struggle. Consequently Liliesleaf endures as a symbol and forms a site of great historical significance, particularly when its legacy is taken into account.

"Liliesleaf was an old house that needed work and no one lived there. I moved in under the pretext that I was a houseboy or caretaker that would live there until my master took possession. I had taken the alias David Motsamayi, the name of one of my former clients. At the farm, I wore the simple blue overalls that were the uniform of the black male

servant." - Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom

In 1961, the South African Communist Party (SACP) purchased Liliesleaf, located in Rivonia, then a peri-urban rural area 12 miles from the centre of Johannesburg. Liliesleaf was to function as the headquarters of the Communist Party leadership. Only those within the Central Committee/Secretariat were aware of Liliesleaf's existence.

Arthur Goldreich, a member of the Communist Party, together with his family fronted as the "white owners" of Liliesleaf, thereby projecting the façade of a 'white front', while the thatched

cottage and outbuildings were used to house and conceal underground liberation activities.

The purchase of Liliesleaf coincided with the ANC's decision to shift to armed struggle. Liliesleaf became the Head Quarters of the High Command of the ANC's newly formed military wing (MK).

From Liliesleaf, the Secretariat and the High Command planned and strategised a path that played a seminal role, in changing the course of South African history. Amongst the committees that met at Liliesleaf were the Intelligence and Logistic Committees, which met in the dining

room and the Secretariat/Military High Command, which met in the thatched cottage.

On the 11th July 1963, the security police raided Liliesleaf. The raid on Liliesleaf and the subsequent Rivonia trial propelled apartheid permanently onto the International landscape and agenda. The events and activities that took place there pushed the door ajar and propelled the liberation struggle down a new path.

Today encapsulated within its landscape is a narrative of enduring value. The historic buildings and structures and the surviving trees and vegetation, combined with the stories that

have been told and uncovered during the research collectively project an iconic symbol that holds relevance today.

The story of Liliesleaf is not only all encompassing but has tentacles that link and connect the liberation struggle and events that defined and shaped the course and direction of the struggle. It is almost as if the Diaspora of the Liberation Struggle is captured within Liliesleaf. A focus of Liliesleaf and its Legacy Project is to not only ensure that a period in South Africa's recent history is preserved for current and future

generations, but also to ensure that society does not forget the struggle and the sacrifices that certain selfless individuals endured.

The passage of time can blur and distort our recollection of events. Historical sites stand as a testimony and vivid recollection to the passage of time. They ensure that events and actions that shaped our world today are not lost or forgotten. They are our link to the past but also our connection to the present and our bridge to the future. As George Santayana, said: “Those who

cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”.

As our direct link to the past fades and those that gave selfless dedication, sacrifice and commitment pass away, we are left with their legacy and memory, which should stand as a testimony and example to all South Africans as we strive to build a shared identity on the freedoms and human rights won and secured.

Historical institutions like Liliesleaf have a role and responsibility in this endeavour to keep the flame of selfless sacrifice alight to ensure that society appreciates, understands and applauds the sacrifices endured by dedicated individuals to bring about the rebirth of South Africa. The importance of sites like Liliesleaf is emphasized by Pierre Nora in *Between Memory and History*, “Sites of memory allow history a kind of reawakening”. These sites bring history to life; we need memory to keep our history alive. Liliesleaf preserves the memories of our past and

in so doing preserves these memories in the minds and consciousness of all.

According to the late Professor Asmal the importance of heritage is in helping South Africa find a national identity. He remarked “The recollection of our past is not to suppress, but to allow a gathering of all. The triumph of memory against forgetting is part of heritage. We have to work out not only a shared identity, but also a shared history and so a shared memory.”

Thus the sweat, tears and blood that were shed must be remembered, without which the context and identity of our new dispensation loses meaning, understanding and ultimately respect. So an important component of articulating our national identity is defined and influenced within the realm of our collective memory and consciousness.

The recent passing of Albertina Sisulu and Arthur Goldreich once again brought to the fore the importance of memory. Their passing again

highlighted the link of the past to the present and emphasized the importance of the fight against forgetting. Evidence of forgetting is discovered when talking to the “new generation”. It is interesting as we once referred to it as the “lost generation”.

Today the majority of the “new generation” has never heard of Liliesleaf and this is exactly what Liliesleaf is fighting to prevent. Site’s like Liliesleaf must educate, inculcate and foster a collective memory of awareness, understanding

and consciousness. Thus the struggle today is about ensuring that the memory and legacy is not forgotten. It is not about being powerless to fight; it is about the power to ensure that we do not forget, that as South Africans we live up to the traditions and legacy of those who gave so much without the expectation or vanity of expecting anything in return.

Thus to day the fight is not about the struggle for human dignity and rights but rather the fight to ensure that we do not forget.