

Simon Tseko Nkoli (I)

Ireen Dubel

In 2007, the South African Gay and Lesbian Archives, *Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action* (GALA) celebrated its tenth anniversary. In a relatively short period of time, these archives have been able to assemble a unique collection focussed on the history of gays and lesbians in South Africa. Magazines, videos, newspaper clippings, minutes of action meetings, T-shirts, interviews, letters and photographs have all found their way to the archives. By making the collection accessible GALA wants to contribute to the actual realisation of the rights of LGBT persons as established in the South African constitution.

'23.04-85

Dear Roy

I am trying to get at least contact with you. But I can't really. I wish I can tell you how well I am, to know about your health. Good gracious Roy, I am not sure of my spelling. My language is so bad. But anyhow, I'll be glad to hear of you. I'll be very happy to know that you haven't gave up praying for us (detainees).

Roy, because of thinking of you every time, I'll try to face life - though sometime I think otherwise. I completed seven months today, thank God. Here I am, with Johnny [co-defendant] trying to bring me back to the normal world. I appreciate him so much that I'm becoming fond of him - pity he's not gay, isn't it?' (2)

To mark the occasion of the tenth anniversary, a new GALA publication was issued. The first booklet in a series on the LGBT history of South Africa focused on Simon Nkoli and the letters he wrote in prison. Those letters form one of the earliest and most important collections at GALA.

Simon is the best known and quite possibly the most beloved LGBT activist of South Africa. His main theme was the indivisibility of all human rights. As a student, he was involved in the uprising against the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in black schools and took part in the demonstrations in Soweto in 1976. It was in the student's movement that he came out of the closet. Simon became a member of the gay organisation, Gay Association of South Africa (GASA), a primarily white, apolitical organisation. He founded a group and organised a place for the black minority membership to meet.



Simon Nkoli in the early 1980s - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)

In 1984, along with 21 other anti-apartheid activists, he was arrested. Nine months later he was charged with treason, attempting to overthrow the state and possible cooperation with the African National Congress (ANC), then a banned liberation movement. These 'crimes' were punishable with the death penalty. It took four years before he was released on bail and six years before all the charges were withdrawn. Upon his acquittal in 1990, he observed: *'In South Africa I am oppressed because I am a black man, and I am oppressed because I am gay. So when I fight for my freedom I must fight against both oppressions.'* He therefore went on to found a new non-racial gay organisation called the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) which organised the first Gay and Lesbian Pride march in 1990. One of the first South Africans who were open about their HIV-positive status, he was very active within the AIDS movement in the last years of his life.

G.P.S. (P.U.) **OFFICIAL—AMPTELIK** G 316
 Gebruik van hierdie omslag om postgeld te ontduik, is strafbaar met R100 boete.
 Penalty for private use to avoid payment of postage R100.

AAN TO Roy i Alfred
115 A Doran Street
Belgravia
2094

HOOF VAN DIE GEVANGENIS
 1986-05-02-
 MOEDERBEE
 HEAD OF THE PRISON

YOU OF STIPPELYNE VANAF 1 TOT 2—FOLD ON DOTTED LINES FROM 1 TO 2

NAAM EN ADRES VAN AFSENDER—SENDER'S NAME AND ADDRESS
Simon Nkolo HO 13/85
Modderbee Prison
Private Bag X 1045
Benoni 1560

INSLUITINGS WORD NIE TOEGELAAT NIE—ENCLOSURES ARE NOT PERMITTED

BEGIN HIER SKRYF—START WRITING HERE

Hellow you two! 18.04.86
 How are you, my love? I have nothing new to tell you. It is all the same old story that I am still living from one day to another, and I am still protected by mercy of God. Apart from Alfred's visit to me, I had not received a single letter from you. I am glad because this is the sign that

Letter from Simon Nkolo to his lover Roy Shepherd, sent from Modderbee Prison - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)

In 1998, at the age of 41, Simon Tseko Nkoli passed away.

During the four years of his imprisonment, 1984 - 1987, Simon wrote many letters. He did so in the little time he had to spare between the tough preparations for his trial and attending the long hearings. He wrote letter after letter, sometimes more than one a day, and often for multiple days in a row. He wrote to friends, comrades, and later to people abroad who supported him. His letters to Roy Shepherd, his lover at the time he was arrested, form the core of the collection now held at GALA. *Till the time of Trial* contains a selection from hundreds of pages of these letters. The first letter, written seven months after his arrest, had to be smuggled out of the prison. The last letter he wrote shortly before being released on bail.

Simon's letters always begin with *My dearest Roy* or *Darling*, but his last letter begins with *My one and only Roy*. He also concluded the letters to Roy with passion: *your loving and only Simon or I am all yours, xxx Simon*. Not all of the letters were smuggled out of the prison. They also left through official channels, as illustrated in the booklet via an image of a letter with the red stamp of the prison authorities. In the letters he also refers to censorship by the prison authorities as his letters to Roy would often be too long and therefore too time-consuming to read: *'... Roy the prison authorities say that we are only allowed to write about 500-600 words in a letter because long letters cost the censor a long time to read. He was talking to our committee ... He quoted your letters to me as an example - and when the committee reported that to us, I was embarrassed, but to hear your name made me to blush a little. So honey try to write short letters, because in future they will not give me your letters ...'*

While reading, I was intrigued by the question of which letters were or were not scrutinised by the censor since, in his letters, Simon is very open about being gay. He writes about his frustration that the gay organisation GASA, of which he and Roy were members, does not want to have anything to do with him because his arrest did not have anything to do with him being gay: *'What are the gay related matters Gasa wanted me to be arrested for? Sodomy? Loitering? Public indecent, or what? I am absolutely mad to read about me being arrested on "irrelevant" issues to gay related matters.'* And so he conceives the plan to launch a new organisation after his release and he asks Roy for advice on a good name: *'What about Cosag (Congress of South African Gays) or Nadege (National Democratic Gays Association). Don't you think it's a charming idea?'*

The selection of letters provide a picture of Simon's political beliefs as well as of his deep personal needs, his humanity and sense of humour. He expresses his preference for romantic literature and pop music and his almost daily worries about his clothing, especially when he has to appear in court: *'My dear Roy, I was delighted to hear from you, though I was so disappointed that I did not receive all the clothes I needed ... Tomorrow I thought I will be wearing the light grey trousers and the yellow jacket that you bought for me, when we going to court - Jana [one of the lawyers] seems to like that jacket; every time she comes around she is asking me "Where is your yellow jacket?" ...'* His requests could not always be met and it frustrated him to be so dependent and powerless. The letters show his struggle with the trial and the challenges of life in prison, especially being gay in those circumstances.

Firstly, only a few of his co-defendants knew he was gay. He refers to it in his letters, but not often. *'I am trying this silly method to get this letter to you before they could censor it ... I am much more worried about you than I am about myself ... Roy darling it's not wise to be on your own for such*

a long time - especially when you feel down. I know how do you feel and I put myself in your situation. I do understand it. You are in a situation that many people are, especially in this trial of mine. But other people's conditions are much better than ours you and me - their wives can manage to come and see them when they have the chance ...' (3) And: '... Johnny's girlfriend came on friday as well, so I was the only one sitting there on the benches looking at other people talking to their friends, parents and lovers, wishing that I could have courage to interfere as they always do when my lover is around. I suppose they all don't recognize him because a gay relationship is not supposed to be real.' (4)

After some time he came out, which led to heated discussions within the group. Later, after his release, he explained the reason. The prison warders had discovered that one of the defendants was having a sexual relationship with a convicted prisoner. The other defendants were outraged and condemned homosexuality outright. Simon decided he had to come out. A number of his co-defendants were of the opinion that the state would use Simon's being gay to undermine the moral stance of the anti-apartheid movement that the group was accused of being a part of. There was even talk of a separate trial for Simon, but a few members of the group and the lawyers pleaded for one trial for all. In the end, his co-defendants accepted Simon's argument that discrimination based on sexual orientation was just as unacceptable as racism. He was able to convince them that gay and lesbian rights were part of human rights. His coming out has been of great importance for the development of LGBT rights in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela with LGBT activists Ian McKellen, Phumi Mtetwa and Simon Nkoli, on behalf of the no longer existing National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality - © Gala (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)



This is a crucial turn.

Some of Simon's co-defendants would later become part of the upper echelon of the ANC and use their influence during negotiations on the new South-African constitution. Adopted in 1996, this constitution contains a paragraph in the Bill of Rights which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. (5) With that South Africa became the first country with a constitution that recognised gay and lesbian rights as human rights.

Openness about Simon's HIV-positive status during his imprisonment was an even greater taboo. In his letters he is vague: '... My dear me! I have left your letter in the cell and now I am locked alone in a storeroom. How nice to be on my own at last Roy - Piece in my mind. I feel like asking the Prison Authorities to give me a single cell. I mean Peace not Piece. To live alone where nobody will ever think that I can spread Aids - to live alone where Aids will never come as part of our discussion.' (6) By breaking this taboo as well after his release, Simon has more than lived up to his role of pioneer for the urgency of gay liberation in South Africa, irrespective of colour.

Till the time of Trial has been published with care. In addition to the excerpts of Simon's letters to Roy, it contains photographs depicting Simon's life and an informative introduction to the political context that shaped the many-sided activism of Simon Tseko Nkoli. A new treasure has been added to GALA's publications in tune with its motto: 'Without queer history there is no queer pride.'

Ireen Dubel (MA) is Programme Manager Gender, Women & Development at Hivos. Since its foundation GALA has been supported by Hivos: <http://www.gala.wits.ac.za>

Notes

- (1) This article is a review of: Shaun de Waal & Karen Martin (eds.), *Till the time of Trial: The prison letters of Simon Nkoli*, GALA, Johannesburg, 2007. A pdf file of the publication can be requested from Anthony Manion: anthony.manion@wits.ac.za
- (2) Opening paragraph from the first letter written by Simon Nkoli during his imprisonment, *Till the time of Trial*, p. 13.
- (3) *Idem*, p. 16.
- (4) *Idem*, p. 32.
- (5) *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Act 108 of 1996*, Pretoria, 1996, p. 7.
- (6) *Till the time of Trial*, p. 44.