

The Life of a Revolutionary

by Z. NKOSI

John B. Marks was born in the small town of Ventersdorp, in the Western Transvaal on 21 March 1903. His parents were working class. His father was a railway worker all his life; his mother, a midwife, died earlier this year, aged 108.

From his earliest years our late Comrade Marks displayed the outstanding physical and mental qualities which were to mark him off from his fellow-men. Brought up amidst all the grinding poverty and suffering which was the lot of the oppressed African people in the townships, he was clearly destined to fill a position of leadership. But what type of leadership? The older people in the community, resigned to having all doors slammed in their faces by the colour bar, expressed the desire that he should become a minister of religion. But Marks himself chose teaching, and after passing through all the classes of the country school, he went to a training college where he received a teaching diploma.

It was at school, incidentally, that Marks acquired his second initial 'B'. He had been born John Joseph Marks, and is still so called in police records. At school he was nicknamed 'Beaver' by his schoolmates, and the 'B' became incorporated in his name. Ever since he was known to everybody as 'J.B.' and to his comrades in the African National Congress and the Communist Party, as 'Uncle J.B.' – a measure of the esteem and affection in which he was held.

In an interview with the African National Congress journal *Sechaba* in November, 1969, Marks said: 'When I eventually joined the struggle for national liberation I remember meeting one of the oldest residents in our town who said: "My son, my dreams and wishes have come true only that you have not gone to the pulpit, but you are today on the platform to demand what we have been craving for all the time." That was in the early days when I appeared on the platform of the I.C.U. and of the Communist Party and the League for African Rights. I joined the A.N.C. in 1928.

'I was much influenced by my father who was a staunch supporter of the A.N.C. and I myself had revolted against conditions, particularly those at the institution where I was trained, where the missionaries did not treat the students well.

'In 1919 I participated in a strike of students because conditions were not good. We were not allowed time to go visiting, we were punished very frequently, and the food supply was very poor. This strike led to my expulsion from school.'

Despite all these obstacles, J.B. Marks completed his training and embarked on his career as a teacher. In his young days he was also a very keen sportsman. With his dominant personality tall build and striking physique, his political insight, brilliant smile and quiet good sense, he bore a striking resemblance to his American colleague Paul Robeson.

Marks was irresistibly drawn into political action by his proud and rebellious spirit, and before many years had passed he was sacked from his post at Vredefort, in the Orange Free State, on account of his political activities.

He was appearing at this time on the platforms of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (I.C.U.), the Communist Party, the League of African Rights and the African National Congress. He joined the Communist Party in 1928. It was a period of increased militancy among the oppressed peoples of South Africa – a militancy which was met in turn with increased repression from the side of the Government, with the Nazi-minded Minister of Justice, Oswald Pirow – later the friend and admirer of Hitler, Mussolini and France – setting the pace.

During 1929 the Communist Party, acting in terms of the 'Black Republic' resolution passed by the 1928 Comintern congress, launched and took part with other organisations in a number of campaigns

against the pass laws. Pirow did not hesitate to resort to force, and many demonstrations were drowned in blood. At an anti-pass demonstration in Potchefstroom, in the Transvaal, on December 16, 1929 – anniversary of the Battle of Blood River between the Zulus under Dingane and the Boers in 1838 – Communist leaders Marks and Mofutsanyana were the main speakers when the meeting was invaded by a crowd of about 100 white hooligans.

PARTY PLATFORM UNDER FIRE

Mofutsanyana reported later: 'I got on the platform and before I got very far with my speech, the whites began shouting in Afrikaans "You lie!" and "Shut your mouth, Kaffir!" I managed to go through my speech however. The next speaker was Marks. He appealed to the police, who were present, to deal with the hooligans, but in vain. At about the same time a comrade touched my coat from behind and I looked back. A white man was just taking aim at me with a revolver. I jumped off the platform. The next thing I saw was Marks coming down from the platform head foremost. Several revolver shots rang out and I saw a man crawl on his knees, his leg completely broken by two shots.'

The Africans made a rush for the Whites, who were now running away. The police now became quite active and a number of people were injured besides the one shot in the leg. Hermanus Lethebe died later in hospital.

Later a White man, Joseph Weeks, a brother of the location superintendent, was arrested and charged with murder, but the white jury returned a verdict of 'not guilty' despite the overwhelming evidence against him.

What had provoked the Whites was Marks' declaration: 'Africa belongs to us'. From this moment on J.B. Marks was to devote himself to the task of bringing about a national democratic revolution in South Africa, overthrowing White supremacy and winning power for the people.

The communist challenge to White racism was presented most vividly in 1932, when Marks was proposed as a demonstrative candidate for a parliamentary by-election in Germiston. Africans of course had no vote in the Transvaal, nor could any African sit in the South African parlia-

ment. But the Communist Party argued that the majority of the inhabitants of Germiston were Africans, and if they were enfranchised would vote for a Communist candidate. The Africans of Germiston location were in an extremely militant mood at this time, reacting very fiercely to repeated police raids for 'illicit' liquor, taxes and lodgers' permits. The Communist Party held several large meetings and demonstrations, many of which were broken up by the police. Hundreds of men, women and children were arrested and many of them jailed for 'public violence'. In one clash 18 Africans were injured by police bullets, and one old woman later died of her wounds.

In his election speeches, J.B. Marks said the white candidates represented imperialist slavery, whereas he brought a message of struggle for full franchise rights, unemployment insurance and an end to colour bars. The election resulted in a defeat for the candidate of the Hertzog Government. The Communist Party conducted its own ballot in the location, and reported that Marks had received 3,000 votes. The white parliamentary farce had been effectively exposed.

After this J.B. Marks was sent overseas for a course of study at the Lenin School in Moscow. While he was in the Soviet Union he acquired a working knowledge of the Russian language which stood him in good stead on numerous visits to the land of socialism in later years. On his return to South Africa, he devoted himself full-time to the work of the Communist Party.

The thirties was a period of great stress and strain for the South African Communist Party, the victim not only of ferocious assaults from the White racists but also of internal schisms and factionalism which seriously undermined its work and support amongst the masses. In 1937 Marks himself was temporarily excluded from the party for a technical breach of its regulations. But he remained loyal to the cause and a year or two later, when the party leadership and policy had been placed on a firmer footing, he was restored to the full rights of membership and once again began to play a leading role.

Following the failure of the All-African Convention to halt the passage of Hertzog's Bills to disfranchise the African people, J.B. Marks and E.T. Mofutsanyana took the initiative in forming a committee to revive the African National Congress in the Transvaal, and were successful in replacing the old, tired leadership with men more capable of facing the challenge of the future. Marks himself was to become an



J.B. Marks (left) presiding at a mineworkers' meeting in the forties. A.M.W.U. Secretary J.J. Majoro, flanked by two interpreters, is at the microphone.

executive member of the ANC and was elected Transvaal President in 1950. He devoted over 40 years of fruitful work for South Africa's premier national liberatory organisation.

In the 1940's J.B. Marks also began to devote more attention to the trade union movement. Unrest was growing on the mines, where over 300,000 Africans, separated for most of their lives from their wives and families, slaved underground as migratory labourers for starvation wages — at that time averaging about £3. 11s. 8d. a month. In the reserves, where more than a third of the people had no land, malnutrition and disease were rife, with infant mortality ranging from 150 to 700 per thousand. In 1943 the Government had granted a cost of living allowance to all African workers except those in mining and agriculture. A series of spontaneous strikes on a number of mines was a warning that the Government chose to ignore.

In 1942 Marks was elected President of the African Mineworkers' Union which had been formed the previous year. In the same year he was elected to the presidency of the Transvaal Council of Non-European trade unions. In both capacities he exercised a tremendous influence on the development of the trade union movement among the African workers.

The Mineworkers' Union met with a tremendous response from the African miners, and was able to generate such pressure that the Government was compelled to appoint a commission of inquiry into conditions on the mines. The Commission recommended a miserably small increase in wages and improvement of conditions of work, but the Chamber of Mines implemented only a portion of even these recommendations and ignored most of the report completely. Dissatisfaction continued amongst the mineworkers, aggravated by a Government proclamation banning meetings on mine property without permission. Marks and a number of other union officials were arrested under this war measure, but escaped conviction on a technicality.

THE GREAT MINE STRIKE OF 1946

In April 1946, a conference of the African Mineworkers' Union decided to put forward the demand for a wage of 10s a day, and this was followed by spontaneous strikes in a number of mines in support of

the union's demand. The bosses refused to budge. On August 4, 1946, a public conference of over 1,000 delegates was held in Johannesburg where it was decided to call a general strike of all mineworkers as from August 12, 1946. Marks warned the delegates: 'You are challenging the basis of the cheap labour system and must be ready to sacrifice in the struggle for the right to live as human beings'. The workers were in militant mood.

Up to 100,000 African miners responded to the strike call, and ten mines were shut down completely and 11 others seriously affected. But the Government responded with brute force, throwing in the full force of the police, armed with batons and guns. African miners were attacked wherever they were found, and in the course of the next few days nine were killed and 1,248 injured according to official figures, though the actual toll was probably far higher. The strikers were driven back to work at the point of the gun. Marks and other union officials were arrested, together with all the members of the Johannesburg District Committee of the Communist Party, and charged with incitement under the Riotous Assemblies Act – a charge which was eventually reduced to supporting an illegal strike, for which the accused were sentenced to fines and suspended terms of imprisonment. Later the Central Committee of the Communist Party was arrested and charged with sedition arising out of the strike events, but after a two-year long battle in the courts, the charges were eventually withdrawn.

Less than two years after this strike – the biggest in South African history – the Nationalist Government under Dr Malan came to power. One of its first aims was to suppress the Communist Party and the growing militancy amongst all sections of the Non-White peoples. The Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 not only outlawed the Communist Party but also gave the Government sweeping administrative power to ban and restrict any opponent of the Government's apartheid policy, whether or not he had been a member of the Party, and to ban newspapers and other anti-apartheid publications.

J.B. Marks, together with other Communist leaders, was amongst the first victims of the Act. In 1950 he had been elected Transvaal President of the African National Congress, and shortly afterwards had presided over the foundation conference of the South African Peace Council.

18 Africans were killed and 30 wounded in the Great May Day

demonstration of 1950 in Johannesburg, in which 'J.B.' had been a foremost organiser. The Congresses declared June 26 to be a national day of protest and mourning, and called for a general strike on that day. The strike was an enormous success, bringing the main industrial centres to a standstill. From that day June 26 has been observed as Freedom Day by all sections of the South African liberation movement.

On Freedom Day 1952 the African and Indian Congresses launched a campaign of defiance against six specified unjust laws 'whose continued operation, enforcement and observance is both humiliating and degrading to the Non-Europeans of South Africa' and which the Government had refused to repeal, Nelson Mandela was appointed Volunteer-in-Chief.

In an attempt to prevent the growing agitation amongst the people, the Government had in May served notices on a number of prominent trade unionists and leaders of the African and Indian Congresses ordering them to resign from all political organisations, prohibiting them from attending any gatherings and, in some cases, confining them to the provinces in which they lived. Marks was one of those banned, but together with most of his colleagues chose to defy his ban as a way of making his contribution to the Defiance Campaign.

Over 8,000 people went into action in the Defiance Campaign, openly defying the apartheid laws, and serving sentences of imprisonment imposed on them by the white magistrates for breaches of various discriminatory regulations. For Marks and other top Congress leaders the Government intended a more serious punishment. They were charged under the Suppression of Communism Act with attempting, as leaders of the Defiance Campaign, to bring about the aims of Communism by the promotion of disturbance or disorder or by unlawful acts or omissions. They were found technically in breach of the law, but the judge gave the accused a suspended sentence of nine months imprisonment.

For the following ten years, Marks was unable to take any open part in politics, and no word that he spoke could be published. For a short while after the first ban was imposed on him in 1952, he managed to spread his voice to audiences at meetings by means of gramophone records, but eventually the Government closed this 'loophole' too.

But if the Government thought that it was preventing J.B. Marks from carrying on political activity it was very much mistaken. The

fifties was a period of intense mass action throughout South Africa. Both in the towns and in the African reserves the people were on the march. Political strikes, boycotts, demonstrations of all kinds, anti-pass campaigns were conducted under the leadership of the Congress movement and the underground Communist Party. As one leader was struck down another came forward to take his place. At the heart of the resistance movement, Marks and his comrades were hard at work. Marks himself held the positions of chairman of the South African Communist Party and executive member of the African National Congress.

With each open act of rebellion on the part of the people, the Government replied with a new repressive law, more vicious restrictions, longer prison sentences, more brutal police reprisals, culminating in the Sharpeville massacre of 1960 and the savage repression of the general strike of 1961. Thereafter the political organisations of the people realised that new methods of struggle were called for. A campaign of sabotage directed against Government installations was launched in December 1961, and preparations were made for guerrilla warfare. The logic of history had persuaded the masses that the only road to liberation was the revolutionary road.

MISSION ABROAD

J.B. Marks was sent out of South Africa on a mission connected with this revolutionary task in 1962, after presiding at the historic Fifth underground conference of the Communist Party. He was a member of South African delegations at many international peace conferences, and headed the South African delegation at the international conference of Communist and Workers' Parties held in Moscow in June 1969. Although getting on in years and in declining health, nothing could dim the revolutionary fervour which inspired his every waking moment.

'There is no way to emancipation except that of revolutionary armed struggle', he said in his speech at the 1969 Moscow conference. 'In our conditions of total suppression of the people's rights, of constant daily terror and force exercised against the masses, with tens of thousands of patriots in detention and massacres a commonplace, with the great majority of the people in a state of seething revolt against

enslavement and intolerable affronts to their human dignity, there could be no other way forward.

‘Indeed, comrades, a war has already begun and is in progress for the liberation of Southern Africa. In Mozambique, in Angola, in Guinea-Bissau, in Namibia and even in the Republic of South Africa itself, fighting has broken out. Brave African guerrillas are dealing heavy blows at the fascist and racist regimes. Behind the lines the workers of town and countryside are increasingly defying the fascist terror and raising the banner of resistance. Inevitably the struggle will spread and merge into a single people’s war which can only end in the destruction of White minority rule and the establishment of people’s power. We shall win!’

A year ago, in 1971, ‘Uncle J.B.’ was struck down by a severe illness while on active duty at the headquarters of the ANC External Mission in Tanzania. When he had recovered sufficiently to travel, he was sent to the Soviet Union. With intensive treatment and his own indomitable spirit, he rallied and seemed to be making good progress, but suffered a fatal heart attack. J.B. Marks died on 1 August 1972.