

Book review

Out of Quatro: From exile to exoneration

Luthando Dyasop

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In this memoir, Luthando Dyasop, a trained uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK) soldier, gives an account of his journey to exile and his life in exile, mostly as a prisoner in Quatro. Upon his release and on returning home, he embarked on a quest to clear his name and to highlight the gross human rights abuses in Quatro.

The name 'Quatro' started to appear in the South African vocabulary in the early 1990s when exiles began to return. When the stories of brutality and torture in the ANC camp in Angola were told by the former detainees they were labelled as dissidents and enemy agents. According to the author, if he did not experience life in Quatro himself, he would also not have believed the stories about Quatro. This memoir should appeal to anyone who ever doubted the existence of Quatro and its appalling tales.

Dyasop was born and raised in Mthatha in the then Cape Province (now Eastern Cape). In the opening chapter, he captures the simple township life of a young man with dreams, but the ills of apartheid felt by Africans would change the course of his life. At the age of 15, he had a crush on a girl, Belinda Wentzel, but realised that, because of his colour, he would never be able to marry her. She was white, and the law prohibited interracial marriages. He was also aware of the repression under Kaizer Matanzima where his opponents were arrested while others went into exile. Dyasop loved art and had hoped to make a career out of it, but this came to nought when he realised the course for which he wanted to enrol was not offered to Africans. Lastly, the broadcasts on Radio Freedom fuelled his desire to join the ANC in exile.

His journey to become a freedom fighter started when he left his home for Lesotho to join the ANC. Once in Lesotho, he was flown from Qacha's Nek to Maseru where he joined the ANC. His stay in Maseru introduced him to the much-needed political education and a completely new life of politics in exile, living on a United Nations stipend as a refugee. Together with a group of recruits, he was then flown to Mozambique. After a short stay in Mozambique, they were flown to Tanzania and then Angola. On the day they left Mozambique, they met Oliver Tambo, the then ANC president, who travelled with them to Lusaka from where they left for Angola for military training. Due to malaria, training was interrupted, and they had to move to a new base in Caculana in February 1982.

After completion of his basic training, Dyasop was selected for a commander's course, which he completed in August 1982. Dyasop and 15 others were selected to go to the Soviet Union for training in the use of special weapons. The training was however changed to take place in Angola. Training in this camp was meant for those who were to be sent back home to fight. Being prepared to be taken back home brought him and his comrades joy and hope. In September 1983, they were taken to Viana camp from where they were deployed to Malanje District. At this stage, Dyasop introduces the issues that would lead to the infamous 1984 mutiny of MK soldiers in Angola, which led to some mutineers being sent to Quatro.

Dyasop ended up in Quatro by association with a comrade called Skhumbuzo who started to confide in Dyasop and a small group, and accused the ANC leadership of hypocrisy and ill-treatment. One evening, out of frustration and disillusionment, Skhumbuzo attempted suicide and began shooting into the air. This led to panic in the camp fearing that it was an attack. Skhumbuzo was shot and wounded by his own commanders as he was mistaken to be an attacking UNITA member. Skhumbuzo and those seen with him that day were arrested and separated from the rest, and given a month-long punishment of hard labour. After about a week, the punishment stopped when they were sent on a mission to recover their looted supplies. Very few supplies were recovered, and the command ordered a second mission.

The mutiny began in February 1984 when the group refused to go on this second mission. Instead, they demanded to meet the ANC leadership to present their grievances. At that stage, they had two main demands: the suspension of the security department ('Mbokodo') led by Mazwai Piliso, and convening a national conference. In response, the ANC leadership sent a delegation to Angola, which suggested the formation of a Committee of Ten to present grievances to the ANC National Executive Committee. In February 1984, a group of Angolan forces (FAPLA) armoured personnel carriers (APCs) surrounded their camp. Skirmishes ensued, resulting in the loss of Dyasop's possessions when his tent was flattened. Sensing danger, he fired his bazooka, destroying one advancing APC. Thirty comrades were identified as the ringleaders. To Dyasop's surprise his name was not among these 30. Instead, a comrade by the name of Mbeko was mistakenly identified for the destruction of the APC. The rest of the comrades who participated in the mutiny were taken to Quibaxe and Pango.

In April, Dyasop was fetched by security under the pretext that he was being taken to Caxito, but he was taken to Quatro instead where he experienced torture and was regarded as an enemy agent. This is detailed in Chapters 19 to 21.

He describes the stay in Quatro as a life of everyday beating where the guards themselves would "[s]how signs of exhaustion from punching and clobbering us" (p. 151) and heavy punishment. Oliver Tambo visited Quatro in August 1987. He acknowledged that the mutiny and all that followed "was the worst period the organization has ever been through in its history" (p. 156).

Dyasop and others were released from Quatro in November 1988. Dyasop and three others approached the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Dar es Salaam for protection as well as financial and educational assistance. The UNHCR denied them assistance, since they were still ANC members. The group therefore resigned from the ANC, after which the UNHCR granted them assistance and they received a weekly stipend.

In Dar es Salaam, the group penned a document detailing their experiences at the hands of the ANC titled “A miscarriage of democracy: The ANC security department in the 1984 mutiny in Umkhonto we Sizwe”. The document was published in *Searchlight* magazine, which exposed the gross human rights violations at Quatro. Dyasop and nine others then left Tanzania and went to Malawi. After a stay in Malawi, they were finally flown back home in April 1990.

On arrival at the then Jan Smuts Airport, they met Walter Sisulu and his wife Albertina as well as Govan Mbeki and Wilton Mkwayi who had landed on another flight. The prospect of having a serious talk was cut short when Dyasop and his comrades were whisked away by SA security police to a detention centre in Barkley West, where they were held under the notorious Internal Security Act. The group was released from Barkley West in May 1990. Dyasop finally managed to reach Mthatha again in June 1990.

When the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) was formed, Dyasop integrated. He did not stay long because he resigned after being denied leave to go home to bury his mother in February 1996. He failed to report on time because, on his return from the funeral, he injured his wrist while alighting a train. The attending doctor at Dunnotar Hospital booked him off sick for two months. The officer commanding rejected the sick note, and Dyasop was told to consult the unit sickbay. The SANDF doctor dismissed his sick note and told him to report for duty wearing the plaster while waiting to face the military tribunal for being AWOL (absent without official leave but without intent to desert). He then resigned from the SANDF.

After leaving the SANDF, Dyasop and two other Quatro survivors tried a brick-making company aiming to supply material for the construction of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses. The company failed as tenders were given to those who were ‘connected’ through the newly introduced tender system.

He finally had an opportunity to appear before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings detailing his experiences at Quatro and the death of Sipho Phungula. Once again, the TRC process was not satisfactory to him. Despite his disappointment, Dyasop however felt exonerated because of the findings of the commission that the ANC was responsible for gross human rights violations. Another disappointment for Dyasop was the failure by government to honour the TRC recommendation for a compensation of R20 000 for four years for the victims, as the victims only received a once-off payment of R30 000.

Dyasop found healing from anger through a 13-month-old baby named Lesedi whom he was babysitting when he was unemployed. On his encounter with Lesedi he says:

Here I was with this innocent soul with a trusting gaze. His fragility and vulnerability to the world did not take away his resolve to take it a day at a time, whether under supervision or not. Just by being distracted by his need for attention and care, I found I could withstand the effects of the trauma of years of horror ... I said to myself, "If I can hold on to this moment and own it, I can afford to paint a bit and write more, taking the challenge one day at a time" (p. 272).

Lesedi gave him the courage to "exit Victimhood Village, cross the Martyrdom Bridge and be free" (p.273).

Out of Quatro is an important addition to the history of the struggle for liberation. Painful as Dyasop's story is, the book is recommended for those with an interest in the struggle for liberation.

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