

J. Congress Mphetizeli Mbata

May 15, 1919 — January 14, 1989

Early Childhood:

In 1919 J. Congress Mbata was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, the son of the late John and Martha Mbata. Then, as now, the country was gripped by a turbulent storm arising from the desire of African people to assert themselves from the oppressive forces of racist white South Africans. In 1919 the country was hit by the widespread Anti-Pass Laws Campaign as well as the massive Bucket Strike in Johannesburg. I.J. Nthatisi, in Bloemfontein, was orchestrating a popular campaign in support of a higher minimum wage for African workers. 1919 was the year of the Peace Conference in Versailles. Dr. Walter Benson Rubusana, from the Cape, headed the African delegation there, as Africans tried to inform the outside world about the nature of their brutal oppression in the apartheid system at the hands of the white South Africans. 1919 was also the year that saw Sefako Mapogo Makgatho lead the protest against the Natives Urban Areas Bills. These were the laws, long before there was a Group Areas Act, that circumscribed where African people could live, i.e., so-called Locations and Townships. In 1919 Chief Fenyang, of the Orange Free State, directed the struggle the aim of which was equality of treatment within the judicial system. Finally, 1919 was the same year Langalibalele Dube (Mafukuzela) headed a campaign in Natal for expanded African educational opportunities.

In 1919 “Congress” signified resistance to oppression. Congress was supposed to be the organization, or the concept, that would carry Africans to their national freedom. It was an expression of self-confidence in themselves and their future, and in 1919, the Mbatas named their new son, Congress, as a symbol of protest and hope for a brighter future. Their choice of a name has proved prophetic, for today the leading African protest organization in South Africa is the ANC—the African National Congress.

Educational Career:

Congress Mbata grew up like any other African child in South Africa. Then, as now, education was neither free nor compulsory for Africans. However, Congress single-mindedly pursued the purpose of intellectually equipping himself for the future. He went through the mills of the Bantu United Schools system. He then entered St. Peter’s Secondary School in Johannesburg; he proceeded to the South African Native College at Fort Hare; and he also studied at the University of the Witwatersrand.

In 1940 he joined the faculty at St. Peter’s Secondary School. At the same time he was elected the secretary of the

TATA (Transvaal African Teachers Association) which became the spear and shield of Africans in their struggle for

education. The TATA was a particularly well remembered group. This was the group, which under the leadership of Z. Mothopeng, led the opposition to the infamous Bantu Education System.

TATA co-ordinated efforts with the CATA (Cape African Teachers Association), NATU (Natal African Teachers Union), OFSATA (Orange Free State African Teachers Association), and TL (Teachers League) in the Cape. It was a formidable front—an enlightened circle that pointed the way out. Needless to say, many from their ranks paid the supreme sacrifice.

In the 1940s, Congress served as chairman of the African Study Circle, a select group which met regularly to study the political, economic, judicial, cultural, and even spiritual problems facing Africans. From this group emerged a number of people who later on became national leaders in the struggle against apartheid.

In the Struggle:

In 1943 Congress Mbata was invited by Dr. Alfred Beteni Xuma to serve on the African Claims in South Africa Committee. This Committee brought together some of the best minds among the African people. Dr. J. Moroka was there from the AAC (All-African Convention). Professor Ngcobo was there from Loram Secondary School. Also present were Moses Kotane, Thabo Mofutsanyana, and Dan Tloome of the Communist Party. From Dr. Xuma's vantage point, Congress Mphetizeli Mbata was also worthy of the honor to serve on the committee. It was believed then, in 1943, that Congress was a highly-committed nationalist and a gifted thinker.

In 1944 Congress Mbata became a founding member of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). Later, Congress was chosen acting secretary for the ANCYL, when Anton Muziwakhe Lembede assumed the presidency. Lembede was well known as a profound and daring thinker, a political philosopher, and a dynamic personality. He thought Mbata's more predictable style would harmonize with his own, and this turned out to be the case.

Shortly thereafter, Congress became a headmaster at Lekoa-Shandu African High School in Vereeniging. Following this assignment, he became an officer-researcher at the SARRI (South African Race Relations Institute), an independent research center whose findings have rarely, if ever, been challenged by both the proponents and opponents of apartheid.

Sharpeville and After:

In 1960, after the Sharpeville Massacre and the State's ban against the ANC, Mbata became deeply involved in the 1960 African Leadership Conference, which represented still another effort at building a united African front.

By the middle of the 1960s, Mbata was a continuous target of the fascist South African Security Police. Luckily, he obtained the status of refugee in the United States. From then on, he and the members of his family would never be allowed to again set foot in South Africa, their homeland.

In the United States, Congress began (1968-69) as a professor and researcher with the African Studies Program at Northwestern University. At the same time, he also was the head of the African Studies in the Department of Political Science at the Illinois Institute of Technology. While at Northwestern, Congress became friends with James Turner. Later, when James Turner became the first director of the newly created Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell, Congress accepted the invitation to become one of its founding faculty members. He was appointed associate professor of African Studies, a position he held from 1969 until his death on January 14, 1989. Besides offering seminars that were very popular with undergraduates and which compared various aspects of race relations in North America and South Africa, Congress will be remembered as the person who helped fashion the graduate program in Africana Studies. Along with Dr. Turner and the faculty at the center, Congress designed the current M.P.S. degree program, negotiated its acceptance by state authorities, and served as the first graduate field representative for Africana, a position he held for over ten years. Professor Mbata's passing is especially painful and significant to Professor Turner, for Congress was the last of the original group of scholars whom Dr. Turner recruited as part of the founding of the Africana Center in 1969 (others have since moved on to successful careers in government and education).

He will be remembered very fondly as Professor Mbata—a capable, competent, and fully informed Africanist scholar. In 1975-76 he was elected president of the New York African Studies Association (NYASA), and in 1988, the NYASA presented him with an award in “recognition of meritorious services rendered ... to scholarship and African excellence . . .” Among his numerous commentaries and writings were: “Race and Resistance In South Africa” in J. Paden and E. Soja (eds.), *The African Experience* (1970), and “Profile of Change: The Cumulative Significance of Changes Among Africans” in L. Thompson and J. Butler (eds.), *Change in Contemporary South Africa* (1975).

Professor Mbata is survived by his wife, Elizabeth Mbata of Interlaken; a daughter, Mary Ann Mbata of Interlaken; two sons, Donald Ntando Mbata of Maryland and Monde William Mbata of Interlaken; a sister, Julia Manamolela of Pretoria, South Africa; and a grandson of Interlaken.

Peter Hlaole 'Molotsi, James Turner, William E. Cross, Jr.