

# Ahmed Kathrada

## by Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

I chat with two young South Africans  
who discuss their favorite singers and their jobs,  
but when I mention Ahmed Kathrada  
who was close to Nelson Mandela  
their faces turn blank. I'm in the wrong  
generation. Who remembers this towering  
figure, Ahmed Kathrada,  
prisoner no. 468/64 locked in his cell  
from 4:00 p.m. to 5:00 a. m.?  
Because he is Indian he was allowed  
one pair of long pants and socks  
while Nelson Mandela was in shorts  
and remained barefoot in the biting cold  
of Robben Island. There were eight  
political prisoners besides them, four  
illiterate, but Ahmed said, "one  
to teach, one to learn." Who recalls  
that more than a quarter of a century  
they were at hard labor there with shovels  
and pick axes, yet planning the road  
to reconciliation. Meanwhile  
there were massacres, Sharpeville,  
with hundreds murdered, including children.  
Ahmed and Mandela had no books  
or newspapers but they were learning  
wisdom and endurance. When they faced  
President De Klerk, they bargained  
for a new South Africa  
and did not give in. They insisted on  
a country that is inclusive,  
the end of Apartheid. Mandela  
became President, Ahmed Kathrada  
served as Mandela's parliamentary counselor.  
Sixteen years have flown by,  
two million houses were built, but who  
remembers this man with  
his quiet dignity, educated in the school  
of hunger and abuse, who has risen  
above hatred and divisions,  
cities where adult servants  
were called "boy," or "girl,"  
where shacks in Soweto  
had neither water nor electricity  
and where tourists now flock?