

# Raymond Mhlaba

'Vulindlela'



Sunday Times

## Raymond Mhlaba (1920 – 2005)

Raymond Mhlaba is probably best remembered for his role in the Defiance Campaign of 1952, directed against the 'unjust' laws passed by the National Party. He said that his nick-name was 'Vulindlela' because people saw him as 'opening the way' to defiance through his leadership of a group of volunteers who deliberately broke the law by walking through the 'European Only' entrance to the New Brighton railway station. In the end, the Defiance Campaign, organised by the African National (ANC) and South African Indian Congresses attracted about 8 500 participants from all walks of life. Their campaign of going to jail rather than paying fines brought a lot of publicity, and pushed up ANC membership spectacularly. The Defiance Campaign was supported by several churches. Mhlaba himself justified his definition of 'unjust' laws with reference to God.

Mhlaba had joined the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1943, and in the next year joined the ANC. He became District Secretary of the CPSA and chairman of the ANC's New Brighton branch in the late 1940s. In the 1940s, he organised rent and bus boycotts. He was banned for six months under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950.

Mhlaba explained that by 1958, in response to the increasing ruthlessness of the government, he advocated armed struggle. He left South Africa in 1961. His wife, Joyce Mkeke had died the year before. Traveling through Botswana, he went to China, where he met Mao Ze Dong and was trained in guerilla warfare. As the Commander-in-Chief of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK), he organised the establishment of a depot for military equipment and financial support for MK in Algeria. He also traveled to Eastern Europe, and then to Tanzania to meet Oliver Tambo. In 1963, he failed to get messages that he should not come back to South Africa. While he was recruiting MK soldiers around Johannesburg, the police raided the farm in Rivonia and caught him with Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and Ahmed Kathrada. He was sentenced to life on Robben Island.

He married his second wife, Dideka Heliso, in Pollsmoor Prison in 1986 and was released in 1989. In 1994, he was elected premier of the Eastern Cape and later served as ambassador first to Uganda and then to Rwanda. He died in 2005.

## History and Memory

In this lesson plan, learners will have an opportunity to study Raymond Mhlaba's memoirs as he related them to a historian in 2001. They will be able to think about the value of oral history and how it provides new insights into events.



Raymond Mhlaba in Cape Town at the Premier of all the Provinces gathering  
Sunday Times, 26 May 1994

### Source A: 'Little did we know that we were making history'

'On 16 June 1952 we prayed the whole night at the civic centre in New Brighton. From the civic centre we left for the New Brighton station in the early hours on the on the morning of June 26. By five o'clock that morning we found sergeants, not even ordinary policemen, waiting for us. All the people from Red Location came to witness this event. The sergeant in charge asked me how to deal with the crowd after watching volunteers. I assured him that our people were well aware of the procedure of the campaigns. I addressed the people and told them to go home or to work after watching the volunteers defying unjust laws. Those who wanted to join the volunteers were to go and register for the Defiance Campaign in our ANC offices.

I led the first group and we entered the "Europeans Only" section of the New Brighton station. By half past six we were already in police vans on our way to jail. It turned out that my group was the very first to defy unjust laws in the whole of South Africa. Little did we know that we were making history.

The Defiance sent many more volunteers to defy apartheid laws in PE railway stations. Most of the residents there supported the Defiance Campaign with fervor. People of PE gave me the name Vulindlela (Open the way), as I opened the way for the others to defy an unjust system.

Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda. Narrated to Thembeke Mufamadi. HSRC



### Source B: Coming between blacks and God

'I remember attending a service by Reverend Tsekeletsa, who was the secretary of the Port Elizabeth African Ministers Council and the Cape Midlands Non Denominational Association. Reverend Tsekeletsa was radical. He preached that black people were fed up with white people. This was because blacks as pass bearers felt the presence of whites everywhere - at work, at home and in the streets. The minister told the congregation that whites came between blacks and God even at church...

I remember H.F. Verwoerd, the Minister of Native Affairs at the time, warned the African preachers and churches to confine themselves to their religious duties if they wished to continue enjoying the benefits and privileges derived from their exemption from the Riotous Assemblies Act. (The Act gave the government authority to ban public meetings considered to be a threat to public order.)

Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs, pp. 62 -63



Raymond Mhlaba hard at work in a meeting in Cape Town *Sunday Times*, 6 December 1996

### Source C: Why are you paid low wages?

'My father and I chose to go and work in PE, although East London is nearer to Fort Beaufort. The growth and development in the manufacturing industry was greater in PE... I did not have to carry a pass ... This was because PE did not have the restrictive laws that were enforced in other parts of the country... I was employed at the Nannucci Drycleaning and Launderers within a week... The workforce at Nannucci was made up predominantly of coloured women. Those women did not waste any time in recruiting me to join their Non European Laundry Workers Union...

Clifford Dladla, who was also a staunch unofficial trade unionist, gave me a booklet to read. The title of the booklet was, 'Why are you Paid Low Wages?' ... (Clifford) invited me to a gathering in town. This turned out to be one of the regular Sunday morning meetings of the Communist Party of South Africa... On May Day, I joined the Party officially... Other Party members encouraged me to join the ANC...'

Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs, pp.21-75



Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba and Ahmed Kathrada sharing a joke before the ANC's submission to the TRC. Ray Alexander looking on *Sunday Times*, 22 August 1996,

### Learner Activities

- Sources A, B and C are oral sources. They come from interviews with Mhlaba conducted by a woman historian, Thembeke Mufamadi. Ask the learners to work out how old Mhlaba was when he was talking to Thembeke (around 2001). Talk about how old people help us to see history differently.
- Ask learners to identify parts of Source A that could tell us that many years have passed since the events. For example, Mhlaba is able to look back and say what was important for history.
- Ask learners to discuss what they think may be different between these sources and newspaper articles from the time. (Relevant newspaper articles can be found on the Sunday Times heritage website.)
- In Source A, Mhlaba emphasises the night of prayer. Why?
- With help from Source B, talk about how passes made black people aware of apartheid all the time. Get learners to carry and produce ID on demand for a week and record their feelings.
- Reading Source B, how did Verwoerd try to come between blacks and God?
- From your reading of Source C, say how Raymond Mhlaba got into politics.

### Other Ideas

- Ask learners to find out if anyone they know remembers the 1952 Defiance Campaign, and if so, what their memories are OR
- Ask them to interview an older person who they know to find out what s/he thinks was the most important historical event in her/his lifetime and why.

### Criteria for Assessment

- Learners demonstrate understanding of the nature of oral sources. They can say what value they bring to our study of history.
- Learners will identify the role played by some of the Christian churches in resistance to apartheid.
- Learners will demonstrate their understanding of the deep impact that passes had on black people.
- Learners will identify some aspects of the apartheid government's repression.
- Learners will demonstrate understanding of the 1952 Defiance Campaign.
- Learners will be able to explain Raymond Mhlaba's route into politics.

### Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO 1, AS 3  
LO2, AS 1  
LO 4, AS 3

Grade 11 Content Link - what was the link between imperialism and World War 1?