



MAN OF WORDS: Ahmed Kathrada during the photo shoot for the 21 Icons project at his home in Killarney, Johannesburg

Picture: GARY VAN WYK

After 26 years' jail, modest icon says he is undeserving

THEKISO ANTHONY LEFIFI

AHMED Kathrada is widely recognised as one of the founding fathers of a democratic South Africa, but he says there are many people who deserve the accolades more than he does.

The ANC activist and former MP spent 26 years on Robben Island and in Pollsmoor Prison and is a close friend of Nelson Mandela.

In 1988 Kathrada smuggled a letter out of Pollsmoor Prison to Oliver Tambo, a national executive member of the ANC in exile, when he heard that the party had decided to bestow the Isithwalandwe award on him.

The Isithwalandwe/Seaparankoe is the highest honour awarded by the ANC to those who have made an outstanding contribution to and sacrifice for the liberation struggle.

Chief Albert Luthuli, Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Father Trevor Huddleston were the first leaders to receive the award at the Congress of the People in 1955. Chris Hani was awarded the honour posthumously in 2008.

The aim of Kathrada's letter was to explain to Tambo why he should not have the award bestowed on him: "I believe that it is in the general interest of the movement to promote an accurate record of events and per-

sonalities in the struggle."

Kathrada insists to this day that placing his name in the same league as Luthuli, Walter Sisulu and Mandela is not an accurate reflection of his contribution.

"They are icons, not me," he told the Sunday Times this week. "I do not deserve it."

As president of the Transvaal Indian Congress, he was one of the "leading activists" in the Rivonia trial. However, he said: "I would not describe myself as a national leader."

This year, along with his surviving former comrades, he commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Rivonia arrests at Lilliesleaf Farm in 1963.

Kathrada took visitors through the events of that fateful day.

One of Kathrada's pastimes during his imprisonment on Robben Island was to secretly jot down quotations to express his freedom of spirit despite his physical incarceration

One of his pastimes during his 18 years' imprisonment on Robben Island was to secretly jot down quotations to express his freedom of spirit despite his physical incarceration. This was his way of freeing his mind.

The quotations covered a wide range of topics by many authors and eventually numbered several thousand, which Kathrada recorded in seven clandestinely-kept exercise books.

It is this love of words that inspired filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn's visual composition for Kathrada's portrait.

Steirn photographed "Uncle Kathy", as he is fondly known, against a white canvas backdrop inscribed with his 40 favourite quotations. The photo shoot took place at Kathrada's home in Johannesburg.

The portrait is published today in the R16 edition of the Sunday Times.

Tonight at 6.57pm SABC3 will screen a short film about the making of the portrait.

In the film, Kathrada tells Steirn about his experiences in prison. He also talks about his move from Robben Island to Pollsmoor, which made him "very unhappy" because it separated him from his "tea club" friends on the island.