

RONALD KASRILS

Member, ANC National Executive Committee

Member, SACP Central Committee

Born on 15 November 1938 in Yeoville, Johannesburg, Ronnie Kasrils was the son of Rene (born Cohen) and Isidore Kasrils, a Lithuanian immigrant who came to South Africa as an infant in 1900. Kasrils's father was a commercial traveller and a strong union supporter, having joined the National Union of Commercial Travellers.

Kasrils grew up during the war years and although he was very young, this left a deep impact on him. He learnt about anti-Semitism and Kasrils was able to compare this to the treatment of blacks in South Africa. Therefore early in his life he began to identify with the impoverished and he tended to have strong attitudes against any form of contempt for people and developed a strong identity with the underdog.

Kasrils attended Yeoville Boys' Primary School and King Edward VII High School, matriculating in 1956. Throughout his high school years he was mainly involved in sports activities, but in his matric year he was taught history by Teddy Gordon and was inspired by his teaching of the French revolution, in which he saw many similarities with South Africa. This resulted in an on-going interest in the subject.

When he left school, Kasrils took a strong position identifying with people across the colour line. During this time (1958-60) he developed extensive social contacts with blacks and felt that he had been able to avoid the constraints of the colour bar, thereby resolving the problem of his identity as a white South African. However, Kasrils was extremely shocked by the Sharpsville shootings which brought home to him the need to be politically involved. This led to his decision to become involved in the congress movement and in 1961 he joined the South African Communist Party (SACP). A strong influence on him at that time was Rowley Arenstein whose wife was related to Kasrils.

From 1957-58 Kasrils was an articled clerk with a law firm, studying part-time, but left to join Alpha Film Studios as a film script writer. In 1960 he moved to Lintas Advertising Agency in Durban to work in its film and television division and remained there until his arrest in 1962 when he was charged with contravening the Pondoland emergency regulations.

Kasrils, who was then secretary of the Congress of Democrats in Natal, was tried



together with the organisation's chairman and treasurer. The preparatory examination was held at Flagstaff in the Transkei, and the trial continued in Kokstad where they were acquitted of the charges. On his return to Lintas he was asked to resign and when he refused he was fired.

In July 1961 Kasrils joined Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) when it was formed and he became involved in clandestine activities. In 1962 he received a five-year banning order prohibiting him from public speaking. The COD was banned in April 1962.

Kasrils became a member of the regional command of MK under the leadership of Curnick Ndlovu and Billy Nair. He participated in many operations, including the raid on a road construction site in Marianhill for dynamite. He was active in sabotaging electric pylons around Durban which resulted in the cutting off of light and electricity in the city. Kasrils and his colleagues were committed to the development of an armed struggle in terms of a just war against apartheid and effort was made not to take human life. The armed struggle originally took the form of a sabotage campaign announcing the break with the non-violent struggle of the past and to bring pressure to bear on the South African government.

In 1963 Kasrils enrolled at the University of Natal, Durban, to study towards a BA degree. However, the 90 day detention legislation was about to be passed and Kasrils knew that the security police wanted to arrest him together with Billy Nair and Curnick Ndlovu. He managed to evade arrest by using a trap door in his bedroom and hiding under the floorboard when police raided his home.

During his brief period at the university Kasrils joined the cross country club and was due to run in the SA cross country championship when he was forced to go underground in June 1963, remaining in hiding until October when the movement's leadership asked him to leave the country to undertake military training.

Kasrils's wife, Eleanor (born Logan) had been arrested in August, but managed to escape from police custody and they left South Africa together in October 1963.

From the years 1963-90 Kasrils worked for the African National Congress (ANC). He undertook military training in 1964 in the USSR and at the end of 1965 was sent to London to work for the movement there. During this time Kasrils worked with Yusuf Dadoo, Joe Slovo and Jack Hodgson and they formed a special committee (1966-76) to develop underground activities in South Africa from the United Kingdom. During this time he trained various people including Raymond Suttner, Jeremy Cronin, Ahmed Timol, Alex Moumbaris, Tim Jenkins and Dave and Sue Rabkin, with the task of establishing underground propaganda units in the country.

In 1977 Kasrils was transferred to Angola where he lived in the ANC camps for three years. He served as political instructor to the Soweto generation who left South Africa following the 1976 uprising and became the MK regional commissar in Angola.

From 1980 Kasrils was transferred to Maputo to help develop the underground and in 1983 became head of military intelligence and a member of the Political-Military Council of the ANC in Lusaka in 1985.

In 1987 Kasrils was co-opted to the National Executive Committee of the ANC with the portfolio of military intelligence.

At the beginning of 1990, prior to the

unbanning of the ANC and the SACP, Kasrils returned to South Africa to participate in Operation Vulindlela (Vula). He was underground in Durban when the Groote Schuur talks between the SA government and the ANC took place, after which indemnity was given to the whole National Executive Committee. At that time Kasrils was at a consultative conference of the internal SACP underground discussing how the Party should re-emerge. Shortly after, in June, the ANC leadership instructed Kasrils and Mac Maharaj, another NEC member, to leave South Africa secretly so that they could return publicly.

On 18 June Kasrils publicly entered South Africa and was given a position in the organising department of the ANC, working in its headquarters in Johannesburg.

In July some of his comrades on the Vula project were arrested in Durban which led to the police being informed of his and Maharaj's presence in the country. Maharaj was arrested, but Kasrils continued to operate underground. Police described him as "armed and dangerous" and offered a reward for his capture. His indemnity was withdrawn but reinstated in June 1991 after the Vula trial collapsed. He emerged to participate in the July 1991 conference of the ANC held in Durban and he was elected to the National Executive Committee of the ANC with the seventh highest number of votes.

Kasrils is currently working in the organising department of the ANC with the portfolio of campaigns.

Since 1979 Kasrils has been a member of the Central Committee of the SACP and since 29 July 1990 has served on its interim leadership group.

Kasrils has been a prolific writer and wrote regularly for the "African Communist" under the pseudonym of Alexander Sibeko. He also had poems published under the name of ANC Khumalo. Other publications under his own name include "Dear Bertrand Russell" (Allen & Unwin UK 1969) and "Bertrand Russell's America" (Allen & Unwin & Viking Press USA). The first is a selection of edited letters, the second a two-volume tome, both co-written with BV Feinberg.

Kasrils is married to Eleanor (born Logan) and they have two sons.

Interviewed 17 November 1991, Durban.