

Book Review

Barry Gilder, *Songs & Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance*, (Auckland, South Africa: Jacana Media), 2012. pp. 511.¹

By Nana Osei-Opare

“We (the ANC) are told to stop harping on the past. We are told to stop blaming our difficulties on apartheid. We are told that our attempts to remind our people about our history are simply the efforts of one political party among many to retain its grip on the electorate. In our schools our children are taught an anaemic version of our history. In the media we are derided and lambasted and lampooned.”²

Barry Gilder’s *Songs & Secrets: South Africa from Liberation to Governance* is an exhilarating, well-written, and well-timed autobiography. The book is divided into two parts, each consisting of four chapters. The first part provides a detailed account of Gilder’s decision to join the African National Congress’ armed wing, Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), and the intimacies and struggles of exiled life in Angola, Botswana, England, and Russia. The second part touches upon the transition from the apartheid state to the new democratic South African state. In doing this, the book seeks to change the *anaemic version of history* taught in the schools.

Gilder relinquished his privileged white South African middle-class life and went into exile to join the armed struggle in Angola against the apartheid government. Far from being the white liberal Stephen Biko critiques for attempting to help the plight of blacks during apartheid only to return to white society’s economic and social comforts, Gilder is in the trenches, side by side with blacks, non-blacks, and women. As the author reveals, MK was not simply a “black man’s army” nor was it a “man’s army,” it was a place for different peoples to fight the apartheid government. Gilder reveals that the MK camps were not simply training barracks, but also pockets of cultural, intellectual, and spiritual spaces.

Violence did not remain isolated in Angola. While in Gaborone, Botswana, on June 14, 1985, Gilder recounts how the South African armed forces discovered a street where some ANC exiled members and he resided. Armed men, in camouflage uniform

speaking Afrikaans, fired shells and bullets into the opposite house during the night. This resulted in twelve deaths, many of which were innocent local Batswana and children, with numerous injured. Fifteen years later, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, John Luis McPherson, chief of the Africa desk of police, revealed that Gilder had initially been a target, but was removed because he had *two* children.³ However, as Gilder reveals, he only had one child at that time, who, at the time of the raid, was with her mother in the United Kingdom visiting her grandmother. For Gilder, the notion that the South African Defense Force showed compassion and excluded him from the “hit list” because of his “two children” is erroneous. Indeed, this thought was crystallized for Gilder as the apartheid-government had claimed in the next day’s newspapers after the raid that Gilder was amongst the dead.

During the second half of the book, Gilder is forthright in revealing the difficulties the ANC led South African government faced in building a new South African government and society because it had no choice but to create a new service “on the foundation of the apartheid statutory service—its infrastructure, its systems, its processes, and procedures, its presence abroad and—to a large measure—its personnel.”⁴ *Songs & Secrets* does not shy away from the reality that the ANC had to “accept those from the old service who had elected to stay on to build the new services.”⁵ Gilder makes clear that there continued to be a deep “suspicion and distrust” between former apartheid appointees and those appointed under the ANC.

For instance, Gilder recalls a meeting in 1997 which Nelson Mandela summoned the intelligence service leaders to meet with him at his residence. These intelligence service leaders, Gilder reminds us, were a mixture of ANC and former apartheid officers. Mandela spoke to them, but looking directly at the former apartheid service members, to inquire about “allegations” he had heard about the existence of an Afrikaner organization called Verligte Aksie Groep (VAG - Enlightened Action Group). Mandela informed them that he had heard reports that this group was supposed to have created a plot before 1994 to siphon large sums of state money from and out of South Africa and then utilize those same funds to destabilize the government and initiate organized crime.⁶

Gilder reminds us that while the South African press would like people to believe that the ANC has descended into a farce, that the ANC took over a political government that had and has not structurally changed from that of the apartheid state. The ANC had gained political power, but failed to gain control of the nation's economic structure. The book is littered with many episodes that highlight the extreme difficulties in governing the new South Africa.

For those interested in acquiring an insider's perspective on the inner trappings and workings of the ANC during exile and about the concrete structural struggles the current South African government faced and continues to face, this is an excellent and very informative read. In Gilder's own words, this book has tried "to simply tell you just how damned difficult it has been to try to turn apartheid around."⁷

Endnotes

¹ Whilst Hurst publishes *Songs & Secrets*, Oxford University Press distributes *Songs & Secrets* in North America.

² Ibid., 468.

³ Ibid., 156-6

⁴ Ibid., 249.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 288.

⁷ Ibid., 469.

