

# An extraordinary life of richness and meaning

By Ivan Turok

Professor Ivan Turok is Executive Director at the HSRC and Honorary Professor at the Universities of Glasgow and Cape Town. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Regional Studies* and Chairperson of the City Planning Commission for Durban. He is an expert adviser to the United Nations, OECD, European Commission and several governments.

*Ben Turok was getting old and had been ill before, but he had always bounced back, his son, Professor Ivan Turok, told the gathering at Ben's memorial service. He said it was therefore a shock to the family, and to many South Africans, when on this occasion 'he didn't bounce back'. As much as this was a sad event, the younger Turok made the point that it was also affirming for the family and for all the guests. He said the fact that so many prominent and busy people were there, alongside an extraordinary range of citizens of all ages and backgrounds, reflected the respect that was held for Ben and showed a shared concern for the issues that bothered him most*



*about the state of our country, politics and governance.*

## **FIRST PHASE OF HIS LIFE**

Ben Turok was born in Latvia in Eastern Europe to Jewish parents, both of whom had fascinating lives of their

own. His father was a leather worker and his mother worked in a pharmacy. It was an upright and disciplined family with strong moral and cultural values. They weren't religious; it was much more about the culture of being Jewish and of ethical principles that governed how they lived their lives. They came



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to South Africa after fleeing the rise of fascism and economic hardship in Eastern Europe. They were originally from Byelorussia before fleeing to Latvia, but then they had to leave Latvia too because life became very dangerous for Jews.

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Dad was only seven when he arrived in Cape Town and he adapted well. He enjoyed a conventional, middle class, white childhood. He played rugby, enjoyed body building, mountaineering, rock climbing and general adventure. He hitchhiked around the country and was very active and energetic in his teenage years. It culminated in him going to the University of Cape Town to study land surveying, but rather than that being a spring board to a conventional life, which it is for most people, for Ben going to university had a profoundly transforming effect and it radicalised his outlook significantly. It wasn't the only influence, but it was important and he became very political. This was the >>

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time of the rise of nationalism; in 1948 the National Party came to power and apartheid was soon in full swing. You had to make a decision on which side of the fence you were on.

### **THE NEXT PHASE OF HIS LIFE**

Political activism dominated his life from then on, and he was threw himself into trying to raise awareness and joining various organisations that were trying to resist the burgeoning of apartheid. He was the secretary of the Congress of Democrats in the Western Cape, and later joined the Cape Provincial Council to represent African interests – he told stories of



how unpopular he was among the other councillors, who basically ostracised him because he was representing the other group. He became an organiser for the Congress of the People, which led to him getting involved in the Freedom Charter, and for various reasons he was entrusted with writing the economic clause of the Freedom Charter at the tender age of 28.

During the fifties he became increasingly immersed in the struggle against apartheid. For example, he became a founding member of Umkhonto we Sizwe during this period. This was very dangerous work of course, against a very brutal regime, so it required enormous courage on his part. During the fifties, incredibly, he and my mother Mary managed to start and support a family of three children through this tumultuous period of danger, threat and intense political activity. Somehow they pulled it off and for that, of course, we are eternally grateful.

Before long, however, he was charged with betraying the country as part of the Treason Trial. He was up to

all sorts of activities that the authorities didn't approve of. To be charged with treason was no trivial matter. Those involved must all have worried intently about what was in store for them. The trial lasted five years – can you imagine what it was like living with the constant uncertainty and anxiety. Shortly after that he was convicted of sabotage for planting a bomb. He was one of the first in the movement to go to prison. Of course he denied the offence, but he was sentenced to three years. Lawyers were sure he would get off. The evidence was circumstantial, but he served the full term, including solitary confinement. It was tough on the family, particularly when Mary also got locked up for six months. We were ridiculed at school: “your parents are jail birds”.

Prison must have been very difficult for him, but he said he came out stronger and more resilient. He didn't regret the experience. But my parents soon heard of plans for both of them to be locked up again, for much longer they expected. The authorities said he got off lightly for planting a bomb. They wanted to put him away for good as they



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considered him a real trouble-maker. The prospect of spending a lifetime in jail was too much to contemplate and he left the country, albeit very reluctantly. Despite being under house arrest, he embarked on a daring escape from Joburg to Botswana. He crossed the border on foot in a remote area north of *Lephalale*, now in Limpopo, on a journey of 60 or 70 miles through the rough bush without much more than a compass. A few anxious weeks later he sent Mary a cursory telegram from Lusaka: “Still moving. Everything fine. Missing you. Love Ben.” That was life in those days. We joined him a few months later in Nairobi.

### **THE NEXT PHASE – TANZANIA**

Tanzania was a fantastic experience for us. Nyerere was the President and it was just after independence. We learned Swahili and made many friends in a very hospitable society. Many ANC



members in exile were also settling in Dar es Salaam. Tanzania was a very exciting time, with visionary leadership from Nyerere who had a clear vision and philosophy for the country - Ujamaa, or pull together. Dad was heavily involved in land surveying, which was his trade. And he was doing a good job, resettling people from flood-prone areas. It was a very inspiring experience for all of us and we remember it fondly. But schooling was a challenge. Only 2% of children went to secondary school because of the shortage of places, so my folks made a decision, based on our futures, to give up this great experience and go to UK.

We lived in the UK for 20 years. The UK in those days was welcoming. There wasn't the xenophobia that there

is today. Brexit was a long way in the distant future. The UK was pretty supportive to refugees like us. I had eight years of free higher education, as did my brother Neil. That wouldn't happen today. Dad was editing the ANC journal, *Sechaba*. He got a job with the Open University and was doing pioneering work on telephone technology and distance learning. He also started doing a lot of teaching and writing about South Africa and development in Africa generally. He was active in the ANC, but not uncritical. He published a critical commentary on the state of the movement in exile which got him into hot water with the ANC because he was raising awkward questions about where it was going. He visited the USSR and began to have >>

doubts about the centralised Soviet system on the basis of that visit and the people he spoke to.

Although he had a strong political ideology, he was also open-minded. He set up an NGO, the Institute for African Alternatives in the 1970s and helped to create a network of these centres across Africa. It proved to be a very important initiative in fostering connections between disparate African thinkers and activists. We would meet these impressive intellectuals when they visited London. They were very rich engagements. Ben travelled frequently to Africa. He got bored with the Open University after about seven years and had a three-year stint at the University of Zambia, where he did research, wrote a couple of books and got involved in development in Zambia. This was another uplifting episode in his life.

### **RETURN TO SOUTH AFRICA**

Ben and Mary were among the first ANC exiles to come back to South Africa in 1990 after De Klerk's famous speech in Parliament. They turned up at the airport without any authorisation. We all had UK passports by that time, and as they entered passport control, red lights flashed on the computer screen and officials sent them off to a dirty, dark room in the depths of the airport and kept them there for four hours while they worked out what to do. They hadn't expected people to come home so soon. Anyway, to cut a long story short, he met up with old friends, Walter Sisulu and others, and were delighted to be back home after a long absence. Within a few months they moved back permanently and moved IFAA to Joburg.

After the 1994 elections he was appointed to the Gauteng provincial government as the MEC for the Reconstruction and Development Programme. He was committed to getting on with practical action and development. When the RDP office was relocated or year or so later, he moved to parliament to be with Mary and he

spent 20 memorable years as an MP. He tried to be a diligent constituency MP by constantly raising pressing local concerns with government officials and ministers. He was active in the Finance Committee and the Trade and Industry Committee in trying to press for progressive economic policies, and he later chaired the Ethics Committee. He kept up his writing and produced a string of provocative books. He was in the ruling party, but he was also able to stand aside from it, to prod it and to criticise it, and to use that difficult space of being in but also challenging it. It wasn't easy and it was unusual among parliamentarians. We all know how difficult that is, to maintain your credibility within your party, but also to be independent and objective. He started *New Agenda* to stimulate debate about policy and where the country was going. He was adamant about not taking things for granted, going beyond ideology and rhetoric, and getting very real and serious about the problems facing the country. He was also passionate about political education and the struggle for ideas in order for ruling party politicians to retain a clear sense of perspective and direction, and not get diverted by material distractions and factionalism.

### **THREE OVERRIDING CONCERNS**

He had three overriding concerns throughout his working life. The economy was his top priority and passion. He was determined to make sure that the real economy was more productive and transformed from a narrow minerals-energy complex and a financialised, extractive system to a broader-based economy with fully-shared prosperity. He talked a lot about the productive potential of South Africa, the incredible natural resources we have, the infrastructure, the human capital, the know-how – and the tremendous possibilities for economic progress.

Inequality was his second big

concern of course. He was deeply offended by South Africa's conspicuous inequality of income and wealth, and the exclusion of the mass of the population from the country's resources and relative affluence. He couldn't understand how ANC-run municipalities, provinces and national departments could tolerate squalid informal settlements, homelessness and destitution. He knew that the country's stark social divides are not sustainable politically or in any other way, and he campaigned to improve the evidence base and quality of public debate about the gap between rich and poor.

And he was passionate about progressive politics. He was fearful of populist politics, captured politics, and elitist politics; always maintaining that it was vital to deepen democracy and encourage mass participation in decision-making. These three elements of the economy, social inequality and the character of politics are intimately connected. Unlike many observers and experts who specialise by focusing on particular dimensions, he tried to understand the relationships between these things. He said we have got to understand how one thing leads to another. It's an interrelated and complex system that shouldn't be put into separate compartments. It is systemic inequality we have, and its not going to be tackled by palliative measures and piecemeal initiatives. It requires structural changes to tackle the root causes, not cosmetic schemes and vanity projects.

### **ADMIRABLE ATTRIBUTES**

There are four personal attributes of Ben that I particularly admired and want to leave you with. The first is courage. He always stood up for what he believed in, and he thought we should all have the courage of our convictions, whether it's planting a bomb or speaking out about sensitive and controversial subjects. He wasn't scared of rocking the boat or even turning it upside down if



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necessary. He conceded that he didn't have answers to many of our complex challenges, but he said we have to raise these thorny issues; we have get people thinking and talking about them in order to formulate shared solutions to intractable problems.

His second attribute is taking initiatives. He didn't just want to read, think and talk. He believed you had to do something to make the world a better place. He was a life-long activist in all sorts of ways – he just got on with doing things without prevaricating endlessly. He had tremendous inner confidence to challenge all forms of authority to try and bring about change. He was incredibly dynamic and resourceful. He could be exhausting



for the people around him, but he was determined to make a difference and to encourage other people to do so too. IFAA was a vehicle for many of his initiatives, for example, he was trying to build a cohort of student activists and leaders. This was a really important initiative at a crucial time for universities and colleges when he felt that the students could play a more constructive role in the transformation of higher education.

Third, he had an inspiring commitment to profound social values, ethical principles and integrity – literally walking the talk. Through his progressive principles and commitment to doing what was right and just, he rallied others to join or support his cause. With his strong sense of purpose, he was a bit like a pied piper; he inspired many people to follow him, but by offering realistic hopes, not by false promises, fantasies and pipe dreams. He offered people a real prospect of social

change and meaningful transformation.

Finally, he had astute instincts. He was able to quickly assess a situation and make a shrewd decision about what action was required. He had sound insight, perceptive intuition and wise judgement. He took a stand on the basis of savvy common sense. I really enjoyed asking for his advice on many occasions, although the answer often wasn't what I really wanted to hear! He would listen attentively and then reason things through with you. This made him widely respected for his wisdom, humility and sharp advice.

Each of these are formidable attributes in themselves, and certainly a powerful combination for a single person to possess. I think he would have been flattered to hear that the Gauteng Legislature posthumously gave him an award that described him as a 'legend'. In my mind, I will always think of him as a legend. And I will miss him enormously. **NA**

# Treason Trial – 1956-1961

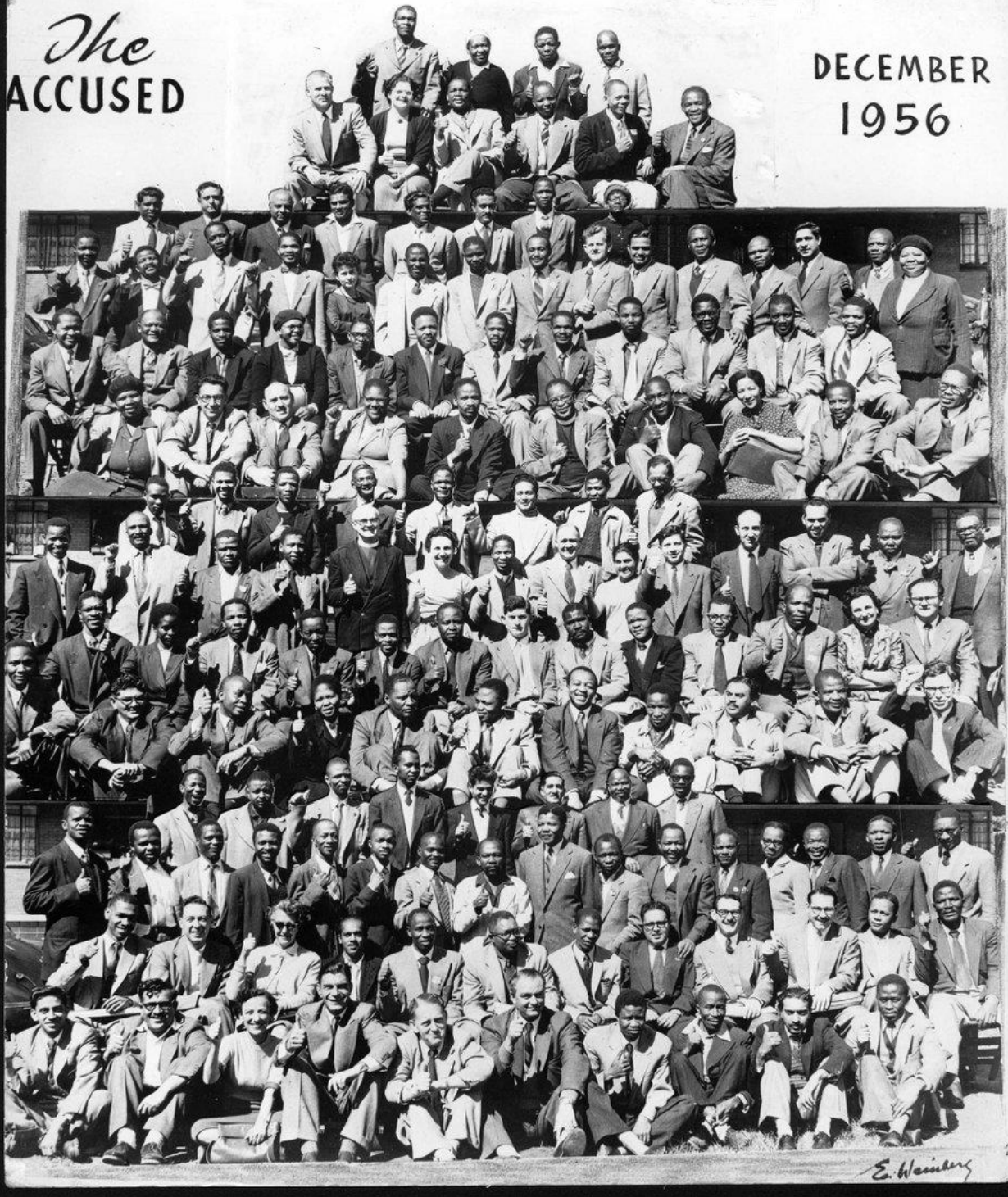


Ben Turok, with Nelson Mandela on the left and Kathrada on the right, enjoying a tea break during the protracted Treason Trial. He is looking into the tea leaves in his cup, probably wondering what was in store for him, for them all.

# TREASON TRIAL

*The*  
ACCUSED

DECEMBER  
1956



Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok



# Prison 1962-65

My mom has got these incredible press cuttings which tell of the media's side of the story. Three months sent to jail and their kids sitting around, wondering what was in store for them.

Star 15/7/62

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## Turok denies bomb attempt in city

**IN A TENSE ATMOSPHERE**, Benjamin Turok, 35-year-old former Cape Provincial Council member and national secretary of the Congress of Democrats, told a packed court in the Rand Criminal Sessions today that, to his knowledge, he had never been inside the Native Divorce Court on the first floor of the Old Post Office Building in Risak Street, Johannesburg.

Turok, of 11th Street, Orange Grove, appeared before Mr. Justice Kuper charged with contravening the Explosives Act, alternatively committing arson in the Native Appeal Court on or about February 16, and of attending a gathering in an Indian's flat in Marston Street while under a banning order.

He pleaded not guilty.

Turok said he was educated at the South African College High School in Cape Town. He took a degree in law surveying at the University of Cape Town, after graduating, he served articles in land surveying in Southern Rhodesia.

**TOWN PLANNING.**

He went to England in 1951 where he studied town planning at the University of London and was a part-time lecturer in land surveying and astronomy.

He was now national secretary of the Congress of Democrats and worked full-time at the organization's Fox Street office.

The Congress of Democrats was part of the Congress Alliance, a loose association of the South African Indian Congress, the Congress of Trade Unions and the Coloured People's Congress.

Members of all these bodies frequented his office.

**ALL OPPOSED.**

Members of other organizations, such as the Trade Council, also came into the office, as well as

members of the Communist Party and the African National Congress.

All these political organizations were opposed to the present Government. Their aims and methods varied.

Mr. George Colman, B.C. (for the defence): Are their aims all equally peaceful?—That is a difficult answer.

Turok said he was held for a few days after being arrested at Mr. Kaitraday's flat on April 14. On May 10 he was arrested on the explosives charge.

**DENIAL.**

Mr. Colman: To your knowledge, have you ever been inside the Native Divorce Court?—No, I have been into the Post Office and now the Legal Aid Bureau offices in the building. I never placed a bomb or any of the objects contained in the state exhibits in the judge's bench of the court.

Turok said he had not been a party to someone else placing the bomb. He had no knowledge that something was going to be done. Prior to his arrest, he had only read about such a bomb in the morning newspaper.

Referring to defence counsel's description of the parcel taken from the Post Office building, Turok said he remembered seeing similar parcels in the Congress of Democrats' office from time to time.

**NOT UNFAMILIAR.**

"It does not look unfamiliar to me in the general sense."

"A parcel looking like that could have contained various types of printed material."

Turok said he had never to his knowledge handled a parcel containing two cylindrical tins with explosive materials. He would have seen by then have handled, thrown or made up parcels such as the bundles before the court.

It was possible that somebody might have brought in such a parcel and taken it away again, Turok said. "I could have touched it."

On the arrest in his office on May 10 he said he did not know the defendant, Major J. Moolman of the Security Branch was referring to.

**STUNNED.**

"I was stunned," he said he received the order of issue a statement.

He expressed gratitude to the court for the order of issue a statement. He said he had never seen the judge's bench before. He said he had never seen the judge's bench before. He said he had never seen the judge's bench before.

He had given a brief deal of thought to the matter in their presence.

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**TELEGRAM.**

Turok was cross-examined about the telegram sent to "Mbeki" in Fort Elizabeth when Mbeki was acquitted and Harold Strachan jailed for three years on an explosives charge. The telegram read: "Depicted your release convey solidarity to Harold. Benood."

Turok said he felt shock at the explosion. His reaction was not approval in the telegram but sympathy.

Mr. N. C. Masters, B.C. (Deputy Attorney-General of the Transvaal): I put it to you that you were delighted at the release of Mbeki and you were expressing sympathy with the act—No, my lord, I don't agree with that interpretation.

**ABNORMAL.**

Turok said it was correct that his indignation had not shown disapproval at the explosion.

Mr. Masters: Would you classify people who blow up buildings as normal people?—In what sense?

Mr. Masters: In the sense that an ordinary citizen would not go around blowing up buildings. I will put it to the court that your sympathy with what Strachan did stamps you as one of these abnormal people—No, my lord.

Laurelizing his argument for the State case, Mr. Masters said that the bomb found in the drawer had been carefully prepared beforehand and could easily be exploded.

The problem before the Court was to decide whether the fingerprints were on the paper intentionally or inadvertently.

**UNLIKELY.**

The fact was that the fingerprints of Turok were found on the straps. There was no evidence that anyone else had handled the paper.

The State submitted that the only reasonable possibility was that the fingerprints came on the paper either at the time the bomb was prepared or immediately afterwards.

Two fingerprints were found in a suspicious position. Neither the defendant nor the State had succeeded in suggesting a natural way in which the prints got there.

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## HANDCUFFED IN COURT

# Turok given three years for bomb

23/7/62

**BENJAMIN TUROK, 35,** was jailed for three years by Mr. Justice Kuper in the Rand Criminal Sessions today for attempting to commit an explosion in the judge's bench at the Native Appeal Court in the Risk Street Post Office building on February 16 last.

Turok, of 11th Street, Orange Grove, appeared before Mr. Justice Kuper charged with contravening the Explosives Act, alternatively committing arson in the Native Appeal Court on or about February 16, and of attending a gathering in an Indian's flat in Marston Street while under a banning order.

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## Bomb was 'badly done' —Turok case witness

**CYLLINDERS** found in the Risk Street Post Office, Johannesburg, appeared to be "a very innovative attempt at making an incendiary bomb," the Rand Criminal Sessions was told yesterday.

Whites and non-Whites crowded the gallery when Benjamin Turok, a former Cape Provincial Council member, appeared before Mr. Justice Kuper charged with contravening the Explosives Act, attempting arson and attending a gathering while under a Ministerial ban.

Special Branch policeman-in-charge Colonel A. J. Spensley heard Turok plead not guilty to all the charges.

**FINGERPRINTS.**

The main charge arises out of the explosion of an incendiary bomb in the judge's bench at the Native Appeal Court in Risk Street Post Office.

Mr. N. van Dyk, a state inspector of explosives, said the materials for the bomb had been "badly chosen."

Captain O. Harter said he found four of Turok's fingerprints and one palm print on the wrapping of the bomb.

"I used a new process to remove the prints from the paper," he thought the prints had been made after the parcel had been wrapped.

Detective J. Warrall-Croft, J. Viers said he knew Turok held a position in the Congress of Democrats.

**LITTERED.**

Miss Elizabeth Naidoo said she was a clerk employed by the Congress of Democrats and that the office was always littered with leaflets, pamphlets and newspapers. This office was also used for social activities attended by people of different races and different political opinions. The interior doors at the office are never locked and anybody can walk in.

Major J. Moolman, of the Security Branch, said Turok refused to say anything when questioned and arrested and told the judge that he was found on the exhibits taken from the Post Office.

The hearing continues today.

Problem: Teaching the children to do without them

# 3 MOTHERS GOING TO JAIL FOR SIX MONTHS

Only a few more days... before jail

By HAZEL FINE

FOUR Johannesburg women, three of them mothers of small children, are busy organising



MRS. MARY TUROK with the Christmas cake and presents for her children, and a friend. She is going to jail for six months, for having furnished the objects of an illegal organization — the African National Congress. The third, second from the right, is Newman Benjamin, whose mother is also going to jail. Left, Mrs. EVE HALL and her one-year-old twins, ANDREW and CHRISTOPHER, and PHILIP, 3, in the garden of Frankenburg, the University of the Witwatersrand's student quarters. Mrs. Hall has hardly left her children since she has known that she is going to jail.



... (The caption text is partially obscured and difficult to read in this section.)

**SEE HUSBAND**

Mrs. Turok has written to the Commissioner of Prisons for permission to see her husband before she goes to jail—and for permission to write to him while she is in prison. (She is allowed to see

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## Turok jailed for bomb attempt

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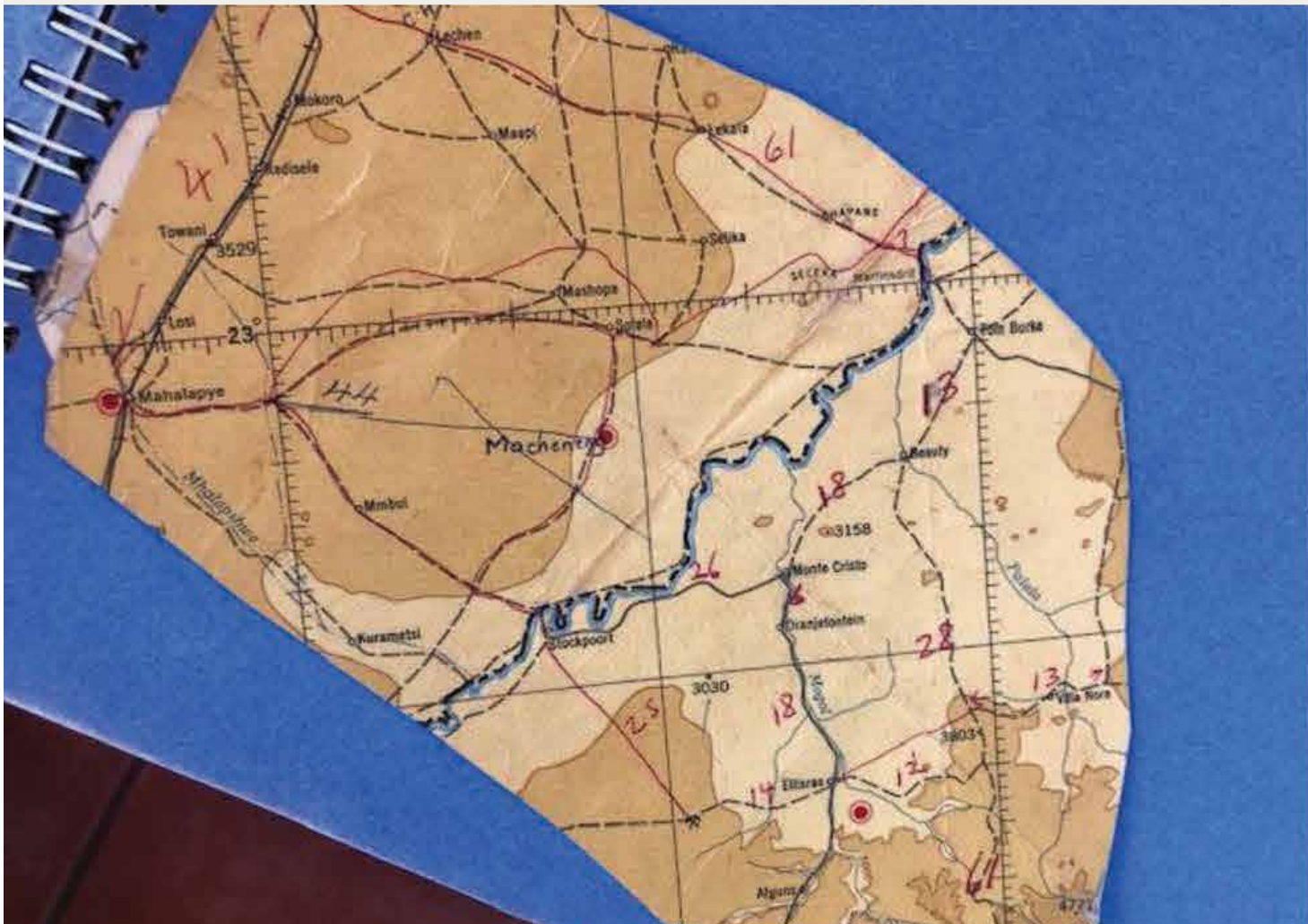
Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok

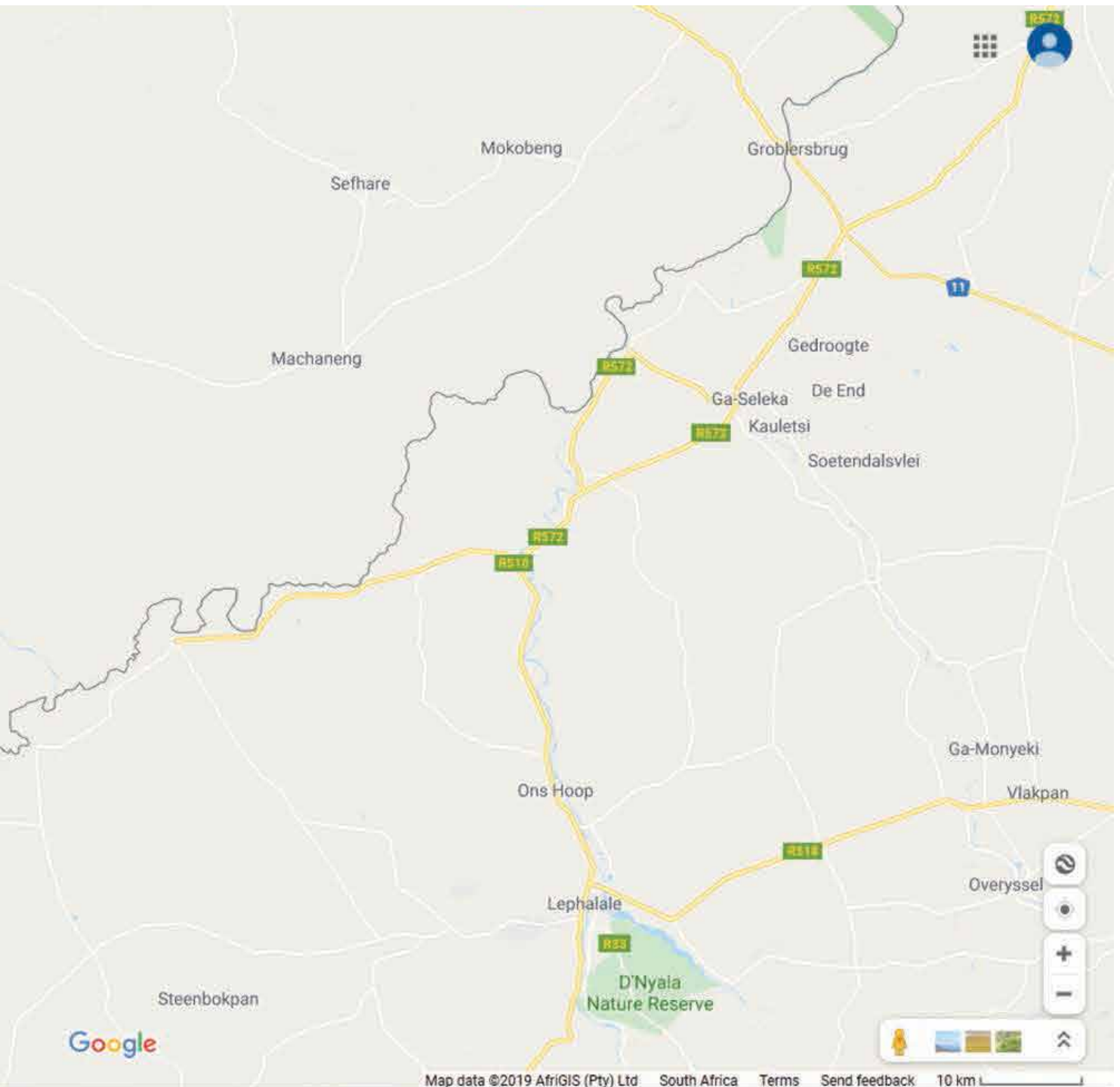
# Daring escape

Mahalapye

Shakwe

This was the map he used for his escape on foot to Botswana. It was incredibly basic. Very bleak. There were very few features. There was a river, a couple of paths. He has got some distances in miles to decide "should I go that way. Or that way?" He hadn't really planned his route.





Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok

# Turok is seen -then vanishes

*RDM*  
*17/1*

Staff Reporter.

**BEN TUROK**, 38-year-old banned former M.P.C., arrived in Lobatse two days ago, according to reports reaching Francistown.

Since then he has apparently been keeping out of sight. Yesterday a light aircraft landed at Francistown from Zambia and took off again later with a passenger. But the passenger's identity could not be established.

Mystery has surrounded the whereabouts of the former secretary of the banned Congress of Democrats since he disappeared from his home in Orange Grove, Johannesburg, last week in defiance of restriction orders.

Turok has been restricted since he was released from jail last year after serving a sentence for placing a bomb in the Rissik Street Post Office in 1962.

## AS WITNESS

On Monday he hired a car from a car-hire organisation.

According to a friend he later telephoned his wife twice from Bechuanaland, the second time from Francistown.

The car was discovered about 30 miles from the Bechuanaland border. One of Turok's visiting cards lay next to it.

Mrs. Turok has since arranged to pay the car-hire charges. But no one has seen Turok in Francistown.

And yesterday the chief information officer in Bechuanaland, Major A. H. Donald, said: "I have never heard of the man."

An Afrikaans Sunday newspaper said yesterday that Turok had fled because he feared he might be held as a possible witness against Abram Fischer.

Another theory is that Turok has gone underground to continue his fight against the Government.

# Turok for Zambia

*RDM*

FRANCISTOWN. — Benjamin Turok, who spent three years in prison for placing a bomb in a Johannesburg post office, arrived in Francistown at the weekend, after escaping from restriction in Johannesburg last week.

Yesterday he was scheduled to leave on the 500-mile road journey to Zambia with an official of Amnesty International.

Mr. Turok, 38, was a provincial council member and former secretary of the banned Congress of Democrats. He was released from prison last year.

Since then he has been under house arrest and restricted to Johannesburg.

Mr. Turok refused to meet reporters yesterday and officials would not confirm his arrival.

But reports said he had stayed overnight at the refugee camp with African political rebels from Mozambique, South Africa and South West Africa. —SAPA.

*Higher and better-organised scale than individual contributions provide.*

*Times of Zambia 1962*

# BEN TUROK IS BELIEVED ON WAY TO ZAMBIA

FRANCISTOWN, Monday. — BENJAMIN TUROK, the South African who spent three years in prison for placing a bomb in a Johannesburg post office, arrived in Francistown yesterday after escaping from restriction in Johannesburg last week.

This afternoon he will leave on the 500-mile road journey to Zambia with an official of Amnesty International.

Mr. Turok (38), one-time Provincial Council member and former secretary of the banned Congress of Democrats, was released from prison last year since then he has been under house arrest and restricted to Johannesburg.

Mr. Turok refused to meet reporters today and officials here would not confirm his arrival.

But reports said he had stayed overnight at a refugee camp with African political rebels from Mozambique, South Africa and South-West Africa.

This morning, he reported with refugees to the police before starting out by Land Rover on the road through uninhabited country to Zambia.

Mr. Turok, father of three children, whose wife is restricted to her home at Orange Grove, Johannesburg, is believed to have an air ticket with him for London. He has no immigration clearance for Zambia. — Iana.

# Turok in Nairobi

SUNDAY TIMES REPORTER

MR. BEN TUROK, former secretary of the Congress of Democrats and one-time M.P.C. who fled South Africa recently, is in Nairobi. He has been given permission to remain in Kenya for 30 days.

Although his wife, Mrs. Mary Turok, has not yet been granted an exit permit, she has bought air tickets and booked for a flight to Nairobi from Jan Smuts Airport on Friday.

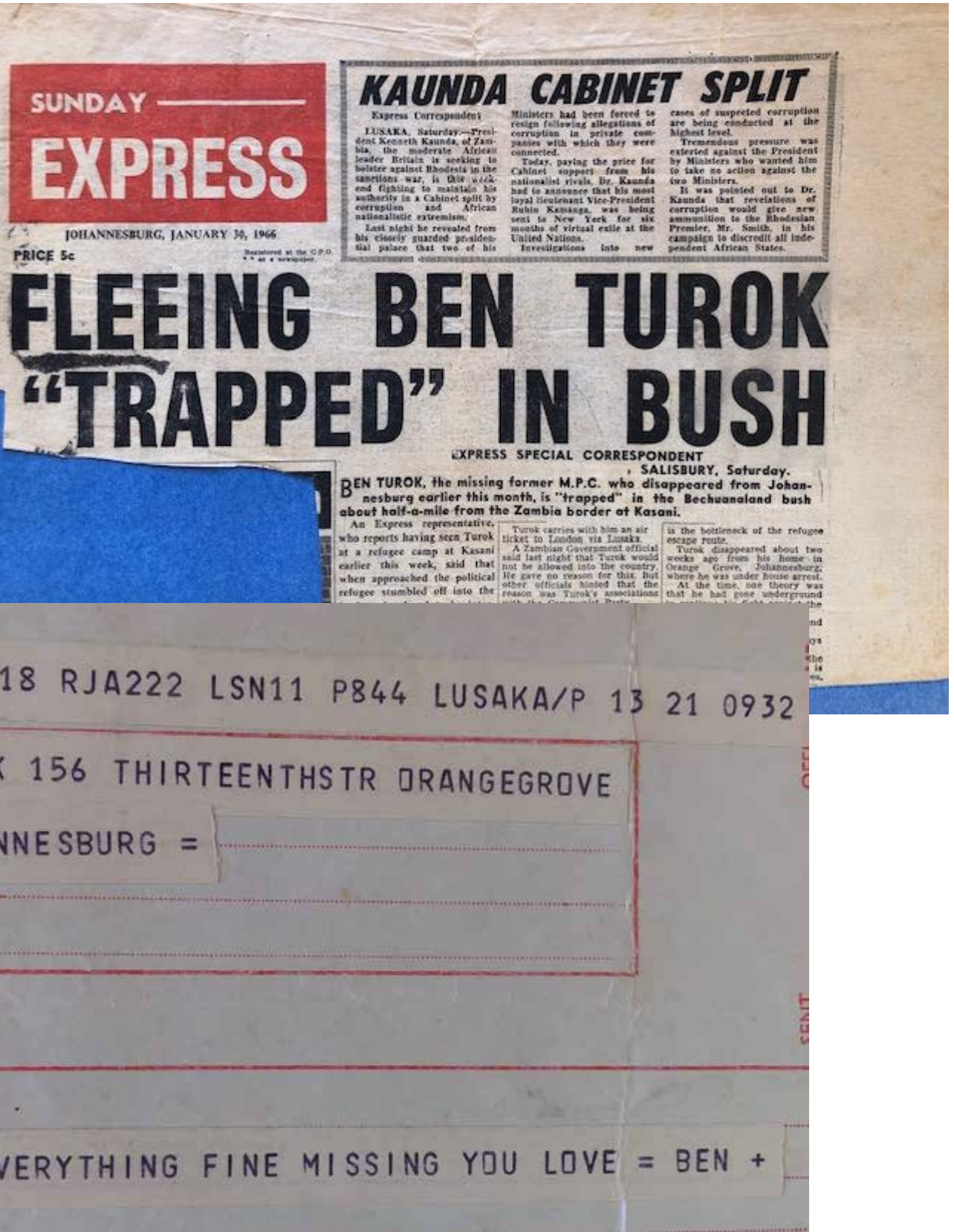
Last week Mrs. Turok was refused a certain type of exit permit and has re-applied for another which would...

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The media was really on the ball in those days. 'Turok seen and vanishes', 'Turok believed to be on his way to Zambia', [like] the scarlet pimpernel, 'Turok suddenly appears in Nairobi'.



Pictures and captions provided by Prof Ivan Turok