Cecily van Gend

One of the founding members of the African National Congress (ANC) was a man called Solomon Tsheko Plaatje. From all accounts he was a remarkable man, possessed of many talents: by turns a schoolteacher, post office messenger, court interpreter, journalist, novelist, linguist and political activist. At a time offering few opportunities if you were black, he managed to achieve an enormous amount, standing head and shoulders above his contemporaries.

Born in 1876 to Barolong parents, he grew up and was educated on a Lutheran mission station near Pniel in the Northern Cape. The young Solomon proved to have an apt second name: Tsheko means 'insight', and the boy exhibited a hunger and aptitude for knowledge from an early age. Having passed standard three, the highest level of education attainable at the mission school, he was then appointed as a pupil teacher at the age of 16. At the same time, he studied English, German and Dutch with Elizabeth, the wife of the missionary, Ernst Westphal. They read Shakespeare together, and she taught him to play the piano and the violin.

In 1894 he left the mission for Kimberley, where he worked as a letter carrier for The Post Office. He was introduced into the South African Improvement Society, established by a group of missionary-educated black intellectuals with two aims in mind: 'Firstly, to cultivate the use of the English language, which is foreign to Africans; secondly, to help each other by fair and reasonable criticisms in reading, recitations and English compositions.' Along with other members of the Society, he also took part in musical recitals.

In 1898, realising that the scope for advancement in The Post Office was limited, he moved to Mafeking (now Mafikeng) where he obtained a post as a court interpreter with the assistance of Isaiah Bud-M'belle, a fellow-member of the Society who became a lifelong friend, and whose sister Elizabeth he married soon after his move. In November that year the first of several children was born to the couple. The oldest son was named Frederick York St Leger, after the editor of the **Cape Times**, whom Plaatje admired. Later, a daughter was named after Olive Schreiner; a son, born in 1910 was called Halley; and another son was named Johannes Gutenberg.

During the Boer War, from October 1899 to May 1900, Mafeking was besieged, causing widespread misery and starvation, particularly to the African population. Plaatje recorded his experiences in a journal that was published after his death as **The Boer War diary of Sol T Plaatje**.

After the war, Plaatje decided to try his hand at journalism. Together with the Baralong chief Silas Molema, he launched a bilingual newspaper, the **Koranta y Becoana** that became a mouthpiece for the voiceless. When this foundered in 1909, he launched the **Tsala ea Bacoana**, and later still, **Tsala ea Batho**. These papers became the platform from which he campaigned for political rights for his people, fostering a political awareness that led, in 1912, to the founding of the South African Native National Congress, to be renamed in 1926 as the African National Congress. Its first president was the Reverend John L Dube, and Sol Plaatje was the first General Secretary.

The infamous Land Act of 1913 introduced the principle of territorial segregation, setting aside only 7% of South Africa for Africans, ending the tradition of sharecropping and causing immeasurable hardship. Plaatje travelled the country, documenting the suffering caused by the Act. In 1914 he was a member of the delegation that travelled to England in an attempt to persuade the British Government to repeal the Land Act. On board ship, using the material he had gathered on his travels, he began writing **Native life in South Africa**, a scathing indictment of the Act. Despite the publication of this work in London in 1916, and Plaatje's efforts to mobilise support among the British population, the delegation was unsuccessful, and they returned home in 1917, empty-handed.

At the end of the First World War, a second delegation travelled to Britain, but again they were rebuffed by the Prime Minister, Lloyd George. His companions returned home in 1920, but Plaatje stayed on to intensify the campaign for rights for black South Africans. During this time he also travelled to the United States and Canada, where he met prominent black leaders such as Marcus Garvey and WEB du Bois. While there, he was asked to do some recordings for Zonophone records, one of which ended with an impromptu rendering of **Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika** - apparently the first recording of this anthem.

He eventually returned to South Africa in 1923. On board ship on his return journey, he began translating Shakespeare into Setswana. This fascination with Shakespeare, kindled in his study sessions with Elizabeth Westphal on the mission station, led to the translation of several of his plays into Setswana, although only two, **Julius Caesar** (**Dikhontsho ts bo-Juliuse Kesara**) and the **Comedy of errors** (**Diphosho-Phosho**), have survived. His other translations, of **The Merchant of Venice**, **Othello**, **Romeo and Juliet** and **Much ado about nothing**, have been lost. In 1914, while in England, he had contributed 'A South African Homage' to Professor I Gollancz's **Tercentenary Book of Homage to Shakespeare**. In its review of the work, the **New Statesman** commented that Plaatje's essay was 'the most touching of all the contributions'.

After his return home in 1923, he devoted most of his time to writing. He also travelled extensively in rural areas with educational films from America - this became known as 'Plaatje's bioscope'.

As a linguist, Plaatje felt strongly about the preservation of his mother tongue, Setswana. Besides translating Shakespeare, he compiled the first Setswana phonetic reader, and during his first trip to England, in collaboration with a well-known linguist, Daniel Jones, he produced a bilingual collection of Tswana folklore. During this time he also compiled **Sechuana proverbs with literal translations**. In 1929 he published **Traditional folk tales and other useful knowledge**.

His historical tale, **Mhudi**, published in 1929, was the first novel in English written by a black South African. With its definite political agenda intended to give the lie to the commonly held belief that black people are 'uncivilised', it has been described as 'a serious indictment of segregation in general and land distribution in particular'.

Also in 1929, his house in Kimberley was donated to him in recognition of his services to his people. In the same year, he was nominated to serve on the Sotho-Tswana sub-committee of the Central Orthography Committee.

Early 1932, while in Johannesburg, he contracted influenza, which developed into double pneumonia, and in June he died. His body was buried in the West End cemetery in Kimberley, after an impressive funeral attended by over a thousand mourners. Among the many tributes in the press was one by HE Dlomo, who described him as 'A great, intelligent leader; a forceful public speaker, sharp witted, quick of thought, critical; a leading Bantu writer, versatile, rich and

prolific; a man who by force of character and sharpness of intellect rose to the front rank of leadership notwithstanding the fact that he never entered a secondary school…Whatever subject he touched upon…was treated with a brilliancy, humour, ability and finish that at once surprised and captivated, inspired and humbled me.'

Quite coincidentally, while I was writing this piece, I attended a wine tasting on an estate in the Stellenbosch area. One of the wines we tasted was called Mhudi. Sitting opposite me at the table, expertly swirling his glass and sniffing, was the winemaker - an articulate young black man from Mafikeng. I asked him about the name of his wine, and he told me that *mhudi* was the Setswana word for harvest. I asked him if he had ever read Sol Plaatje's novel, at which he smiled. 'Ah yes', he said, 'that also influenced my naming of the wine.'

As I wrote, I was struck by the similarities between Plaatje and Eugène Marais. Contemporaries in age, both lived through the same events and crises in their country's history. Both were mission-, or clergy-educated and both were, at some stage, journalists, and owned newspapers. In different ways, each was affected by the Boer War. Both were accomplished linguists, and both felt strongly about and fought for the language and political rights of their people. But this country being what it is, they had probably never even heard of each other, let alone met. This is one of the great sadnesses of our history: I think that, had they met, they would have had much in common and a great deal to talk about. Perhaps they would even have been friends.