

# Liliesleaf

The Liliesleaf Trust recently played a pivotal role in the return of a signed, original copy of the 1955 Freedom Charter to South Africa. This is a significant event, and forms part of the development of the Liliesleaf site as a 'holistic museum experience' that provides a 'journey of enlightenment'.

May 7th, 2010 was a day of far happier historical significance at Liliesleaf than the infamous day of the apartheid police raid on 11 July 1963. Through an extraordinary series of events a signed, original copy of the 1955 Freedom Charter was returned to South Africa and accepted by Deputy President Kgalema Motlanthe and Minister of Arts and Culture Lulu Xingwana at the site.

This particular signed copy of the Charter came up for auction at Bonhams auction house in London. The South African National Archives contacted Nicholas Wolpe, CEO of the Liliesleaf Trust, to assist in retrieving this fundamental piece of South African history. (Wolpe's father, Harold, was one of the few Rivonia accused to escape from prison) The Charter was bought for £60 000 and will in future be stored in the National Archives.

As Wolpe sees it, besides the Trust's involvement with purchasing the Charter,

Liliesleaf itself is a 'unique and pertinent place' for its return as 'to some extent, aspects of the Charter were articulated and given expression through the activities here'.

The opening paragraph of the Freedom Charter as adopted at the Congress of the People in Kliptown on 26 June 1955 states: 'We, the people of South Africa, declare for all our country and the world to know: that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and that no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of all the people'.

The significance of Liliesleaf is not just in the history of the raid but also in the meetings of a truly 'diverse group of leaders, with differing religious and even political ideals, who put aside their own interests in order to pursue a bigger vision – the overthrow of apartheid'. Wolpe draws a parallel between Robben Island and Liliesleaf,

Images courtesy of the Liliesleaf Trust







The Thatched Cottage, scene of the arrests



saying that the island is testimony to a power of the human spirit that could not be crushed while Liliesleaf is the ‘personification and expression of what the liberation struggle was about’.

Liliesleaf witnessed the development of the ‘armed struggle’. The farm was originally purchased in 1961 by the South African Communist Party (SACP). Later it became the headquarters for the ANC’s military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) or ‘Spear of the Nation’.

On 11 July 1963 the South African National Security Police raided the farm hoping to find Walter Sisulu there. Instead they surprised a meeting of the high command of MK. The meeting was taking place in the Thatched Cottage behind the Main

House; not only was Sisulu present but also Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Rusty Bernstein and Raymond Mahlaba. They were taken by surprise, and having no opportunity for escape, were all arrested. Draft documents for Operation Mayibuye, a plan for guerrilla warfare in South Africa, were under discussion and lay on the

table in front of them. A desperate Dennis Goldberg, trying to dispose of other incriminating documents, was arrested in the Main House. The fateful meeting was to have been the last at Liliesleaf Farm because the leadership of MK had been concerned that it and its underground activities had been discovered by the apartheid government.

Nelson Mandela had previously been living at the farm pretending to be a ‘houseboy’ but was not in fact present on the day of the 1963 raid, as he was already serving a five-year prison sentence on Robben Island. It was the discovery of his diaries and papers, hidden in the farm’s Coal Shed by Arthur Goldreich, that precipitated his status as Accused Number One for the subsequent Rivonia Trial.

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The watershed trial, where 156 accused were charged with 221 acts of sabotage against the state, began in October 1963 and ended in June 1964. Most of the accused were subjected to South Africa's notorious 90-days-without-trial law. Mandela and Sisulu's co-accused also included Andrew Mlangeni, Bram Fischer, Joe Slovo, Ruth First and Harold Wolpe.

With the emergence of the 'New South Africa' post 1994, it became important for the country to start honouring places of anti-apartheid activity and memory. The Liliesleaf Reunion was held in 2001. Then South African

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President, Thabo Mbeki, established the Liliesleaf Trust to ‘restore, preserve and maintain the historical structure, buildings and legacy of the site’. The aim of the Trust is to ‘ensure that the essence, spirit and soul of Liliesleaf are maintained for current and future generations’. This task is felt keenly by Wolpe, the CEO of the Trust. ‘Liliesleaf is a living,

breathing entity, a place of activity,’ he says. ‘It cannot be a static entity – that would fly in the face of what Liliesleaf is about.’

Currently Liliesleaf consists of the historic Main House, Outbuildings, Thatched Cottage, Garage, Coal Shed, Coal Bunker, and the new Liberation and Resource Centres and the ‘Secret Safaris’ Bedford truck.

The People Map in the Liberation Centre graphically represents the ‘tentacles’ of stories, and the associations of people linked to the site. Names of the six men arrested on the farm during the raid form a tight circle in the middle of the Map. Names of connecting people radiate and spiral outwards – Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathrada, Nelson Mandela, George Bizos and Ruth First jump out from against the brickwork (amongst many famous others) while others not so immediately recognisable prove intriguing – one is compelled to play with the interactive touch-screen version of the People Map to learn more about each one.





Nelson Mandela's room



The Interactive Table in the Main House

The new Resource Centre





The Trust/ Pixel Project has already won two awards for the Interactive Table in the Main House: a Silver Loerie (Experiential Digital Application) and a ‘Best in Class: Museum’ from the Interactive Media Council. When discussing the exhibits Wolpe talks about literally ‘making the walls talk’, of ‘not creating a place where visitors just read text panels’.

The table displays a ‘3D interface consisting of video, images, audio, and text and is browsed by visitors using two aluminium “navigators”’. The Cabinet of Curiosity in the lounge of the Main House presents stories of spies up telephone poles and a mysterious cellar and will shortly be upgraded to include animation and additional audio.

All the buildings are strikingly bare of furnishings – testimony to a history discounted, sold and lost post the raid and pre-1994 South Africa. Wandering the passages of the Main House, one is stopped by an eerily

ringing telephone – an old black handset, with a dial – picking it up one not only hears stories of spy agents, ‘terrorists’ and infiltrators but also feels the immediacy of the adrenalin rush of tension, secrecy, fear and dark hope that surely shadowed the struggle leaders in every waking moment.

Liliesleaf really does provide a ‘journey of enlightenment’ to visitors, teaching us that not a single one of us exists merely as an isolated individual; we carry our family stories, our histories and our memories in every waking moment. We move among sites and places that vibrate with the stories to which they have played host, we interact with those who have walked the path to freedom and those who will improve upon it. Our personal stories are intimately connected and entwined and we continue to write them every day.

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