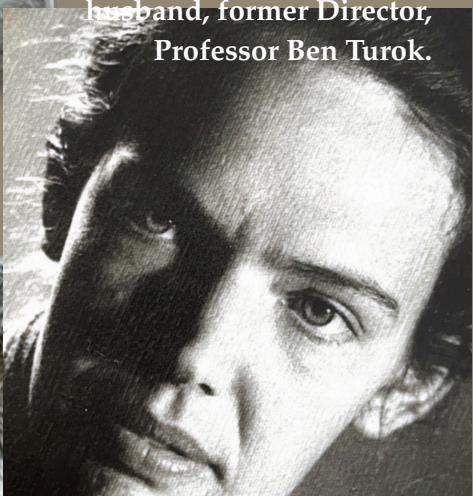


# The life story of Mary Turok - a tribute

By Ivan Turok

Confronted by the brutality of apartheid during the 1950s and 1960s, Mary Turok became a brave and feisty political activist. After apartheid was defeated, she mellowed into a deeply compassionate woman guided by a profound humanity and selfless determination to support poor and vulnerable groups, in the spirit of Ubuntu. IVAN TUROK pays tribute to his late mother, a constant presence at the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA), working alongside her husband, former Director, Professor Ben Turok.





**M**ary Butcher was born in 1932 to upper middle-class parents who were Christian Scientists. After a sheltered, apolitical upbringing in KwaZulu-Natal, she went to university in Cape Town in 1950 aged only 17. Her privileged background had a lasting effect in that she knew what it meant to be different from your peers, and religion taught her that your beliefs and values really mattered.

The National Party had just come to power and was rolling out harsh and repressive laws. Mary's exposure to growing racism and social injustice, and her involvement in student life were radicalising experiences, leading her to rebel against her establishment background. She became a surprising champion of progressive causes despite her conventional upbringing, and immersed herself in various political campaigns, community activities, and trade union battles. She learnt how important it was to help people become organised in order to protect and further their interests, and was willing to put in the effort to assist.

For example, she helped the late struggle icon, Helen Joseph, to run a feeding scheme on the Cape Flats, where she witnessed forced evictions of people living in shacks. On another occasion she joined a small group who painted a large slogan on the rock face below Signal Hill saying DOWN WITH MALAN, the then prime minister.

### **Modern Youth Society**

Early on, Mary joined the Modern Youth Society (MYS), which was aligned with the ANC and, for some of its members, the underground Communist Party. It held meetings in the Mitra Hall, Mowbray, which was centrally located so that people of all backgrounds from across Cape Town could easily get there. She later became secretary of the MYS.

MYS members regarded themselves as socialists and called each other comrade. This was dangerous at the time because the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 meant you could be imprisoned for years for what were very widely defined communist activities. At the time, modern meant critical, avant-garde – breaking taboos, non-conformism and challenging art, literature, and architecture. The MYS symbolised something defiant and revolutionary.



Mary was more independent than most members in many ways. She loved the spirit of rebellion and breaking the mould, alongside the very serious mission to bring down apartheid. Being actively involved in the meaningful cause of confronting discrimination and orthodox thinking with such a diverse group of passionate people was exciting and enriching, although full of hazards as well.

### **Defiance Campaign**

The Defiance Campaign Against Unjust Laws was launched in June 1952. It involved volunteers peacefully breaking apartheid laws and led to over 8,000 arrests in the first few months. Mary was one of the first to be arrested in Cape Town, for sitting on the non-white seats in the general post office. Fortunately, her lawyer was astute and she was discharged.



*Mary Turok, with Albie Sachs and Joseph Nkatlo, the Western Cape Chairperson of the ANC, give the 'thumbs up salute of the Congress Movement at the time.*



MYS members lived dangerously on the verge of breaking the law all the time. When banning orders were issued, people often broke them, risking arrest. As the government clamped down on opponents and banned many leaders, Mary found herself slotted into vacant positions in youth, peace, and other committees. Her strong convictions gave her the confidence to accept leadership responsibilities, even though she felt completely ill-equipped, as she explained later. On one occasion she was asked to address a memorial meeting when Joseph Stalin died! There was no internet in those days to swot up quickly.

She was also a founding member of the South African Congress of Democrats (COD). This was a left-wing, white, anti-apartheid organisation founded in 1953 and a key part of the multi-racial Congress Alliance after the ANC invited whites to become part of the Congress Movement. The COD advocated racial equality and sought to demonstrate opposition to apartheid among whites.

### **Marriage to Ben Turok**

Towards the end of 1953 and while still only 21, Mary formed a relationship with Ben. It started when Brian Bunting, editor of the pro-ANC *Guardian* newspaper, asked Ben to accompany Mary to the ANC national conference in Queenstown. By this time Mary was a reporter on the newspaper.

Ben came from a completely different background – he was Jewish, but secular and cosmopolitan. Unlike Mary, his immediate family had direct experience of prejudice and hardship in Eastern Europe. Both Mary and Ben's parents objected to their relationship, but in another act of defiance they got married secretly in the hope of averting further strife. Shared belief in progressive values and in emancipation bound them together in a tight partnership that endured for the rest of their lives. They were fully committed to struggle side-by-side and in a very single-minded way against oppression and exploitation, wherever these conditions existed.

There was a tension running through the Movement between independence and conformity. On the one hand, people were rebelling against the system – the law, culture, and fundamental structure of society. Yet the struggle also required concerted action, cohesion, and strict discipline, including a respect for leadership and a degree of conformity.





Mary and Ben were revolutionaries at heart, not just in their ideals but in their practical actions. They were willing to give their lives for the cause, but they were also independent and more rebellious than most comrades. They were sometimes criticised for being free spirits and going their own way. Mary didn't withhold her views and wouldn't necessarily toe the line if she believed it was the wrong thing to do. She never stopped trying to persuade others to become more active and do something of tangible value. She wasn't spiteful or nasty, but firm, direct, and quite hard in what she expected of herself and other comrades.

Conditions for people within the Movement became more difficult and life more disruptive in the late 1950s, with mounting state persecution, banning orders, and arrests. Mary really battled to juggle her political activities with caring for their three young children, so life was extremely stressful. She was in Cape Town while Ben was immersed in the Treason Trial and in organisational work for the Movement, usually in Johannesburg, and could spend little time at home. After several years she moved with the children to Johannesburg, so they could be closer to Ben.

### **Imprisonment**

National tensions escalated with the campaign against the pass laws, the Sharpeville massacre, and the resulting state of emergency in 1960. When the banned ANC initiated the armed struggle in response to Sharpeville, Ben was instructed to undertake an act of sabotage, unbeknown to Mary. She only found out when a story about the bungled post office bomb appeared in the newspaper. Ben spent three painful years in Pretoria Central prison, where he regularly heard black male prisoners singing with anguished voices as they trundled down the corridor to the gallows.

Months after his 1962 arrest, the ANC launched a poster campaign warning of repercussions for Sharpeville. Mary was banned from attending meetings by this stage but secretly got together with three other women to paste up posters across Joburg's northern suburbs. They were discovered, arrested, and charged with furthering the objects of an illegal organisation.

Mary was convicted and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, with 12 months suspended. She spent most of her sentence in Pietersburg, under a hostile Afrikaans manager, but made friends in prison with a sex worker and a woman who murdered her husband with a shotgun after being assaulted by him.



Life was extremely tough for Mary after her release from prison. The government's attitude towards opponents was hardening and she learnt that people were being tortured in prison. She was given another banning order, placed under suburb arrest, and experienced constant surveillance and harassment by the police – virtual imprisonment as she explained in letters to a friend. She found it difficult to handle tensions between her three boys and spent sleepless nights fearing that Ben wouldn't be allowed home after serving his sentence. She felt isolated with few friends in the area and could only write to Ben every three months and visit him every six. Indeed, she was ostracised by many of the neighbours and her children were teased at school for their father being a jailbird.



*Back home ... Mary Turok reunited with her sons, Fred and Ivan, after her release from prison in 1963.*

*Photo supplied by the Turok family*

### **Leaving for exile**

Shortly after Ben was released, there was a rumour that Mary would be arrested for being a member of the Communist Party, which carried a minimum five-year sentence. With three young children, they had to do something urgently because her parents refused to help in the event that she was imprisoned again. Despite their enormous reluctance to go into exile and apparently abandon their comrades, they realised that



the only real option was for Ben to skip the border and leave the rest of the family behind in the hope that the police wouldn't arrest Mary if she had sole custody of the kids.

Their gamble proved correct after Ben undertook a daring escape overland to Botswana in early 1966, and then went on incognito to Kenya. Mary and the boys followed six weeks later on an exit permit, meaning that she could never come back. The government froze their assets, so they left with very few resources.



Nevertheless, the family spent three happy years in East Africa, mainly in Tanzania, which was enjoying a resurgence following independence. The atmosphere was relaxed, race relations were warm and friendly, and the sense of liberation was palpable.

However, the education system wasn't easy for the boys to navigate, so the family reluctantly left for the UK.



Mary and Ben spent the next 20 years in exile in London, excluding a three-year stint in Zambia from 1979-82 to be closer to home. Mary worked as a medical researcher and then a social worker, all the while maintaining close links with the ANC office and the Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM). Mary was most actively involved in the ANC Women's League and in the local branch of the AAM.

Mary and Ben rose above such difficulties and demonstrated remarkable versatility by adapting their interests and activities to their changing environments. They became fully absorbed in undertaking local research, teaching, community, and political activities in Tanzania, Zambia, and England and made lasting contributions in all three contexts. One of their most important legacies is the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA), and its journal *New Agenda: South African Journal of Social and Economic Policy*. Mary played a vital role behind the scenes in both endeavours through writing, editorial, and administrative tasks.

### **Member of Parliament**

When Nelson Mandela was released in 1990 and the ANC was unbanned, they were among the first to return home and settled in Johannesburg. Mary was nominated by her branch to be on the ANC's election list for Parliament and spent five years as a backbench MP. Although she didn't find being an MP a rewarding experience, there was a spirit of great excitement and hope about the new South Africa and she played a small part in ensuring the Constitution would be the most gender sensitive in the world.

Mary made 16 speeches during her time in Parliament and sat on three portfolio committees – Housing, Transport, and Social Development. In notes for her memoir, she states that her main experience as an MP was to learn more about the ugly and harsh ways in which the National Party imposed separate development on the country. She also came to appreciate the enormous changes required for South Africa to become a genuinely free and fair society, and began to question whether the political will existed to get to the bottom of many of the problems and tackle them seriously.





One frustration was discovering that government ministers and officials did not seem to take the ideas and recommendations of portfolio committees and MPs seriously, despite all the effort and care she and her colleagues put into their work. As a nominated MP parachuted in to represent the constituency of Mitchells Plain, she also felt something of an imposter when she encountered impressive grassroots activists and UDF members who were much better placed to represent the interests of the local community. The disconnect between many ANC MPs and local communities has of course become a mounting concern subsequently.

In her parliamentary speeches Mary consistently advocated for the poor and marginalised groups, and drew attention to a host of uncomfortable issues and problems that remain unresolved to this day. She spoke out repeatedly about road safety, in light of the country having the highest rate of road traffic accidents and fatalities in the world. She called for speed limits to be enforced and the safety of pedestrians to be improved through more and better sidewalks. She also said more effort should be devoted to tarring roads in townships and informal settlements, and spoke up for a shift towards public transport rather than private.

In housing, she advised a multipronged approach rather than a narrow focus on giving free Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) dwellings to passive beneficiaries. She believed that people's energy and skills should be harnessed to build their own homes through soft loans, advice, training, and the availability of cheap materials. She also criticised the delays in helping impoverished communities to upgrade informal settlements. And she was ahead of her time in advocating that well-located, vacant government-owned land should be released for public housing.

In social development, she offered a prescient warning about government overreach and resources being stretched too thinly to make much difference, leading to programme failures. She was particularly worried about the plight of many children living on the streets who get caught up in crime and end up in squalid and overcrowded prisons. She advocated higher standards of secure care and a developmental approach to young people through community-based services that offer greater support and pathways out of poverty. She believed that social policy shouldn't just be about widening access to grants and other welfare support, but building accountability and fairness mechanisms into the delivery of welfare services.



## **Extra-parliamentary activism**

After leaving Parliament, Mary played a key role over many years in establishing the South African Older Persons Forum (SAOPF), and she was elected its first chairperson. The Forum emerged from a wide-ranging inquiry into the neglect and abuse suffered by older black people at the hands of their families, communities, and government officials. The investigation led in turn to an Act of Parliament, a national convention, a steering committee and ultimately the creation of the SAOPF (with provincial and district forums) in 2005. Mary understood the issues thoroughly and performed important functions in all these structures, in effect becoming a loyal ambassador for the interests of older people.

The main purpose of the SAOPF was to give older persons a platform and a unified voice, as well as to engage government on the hardships and distress affecting them. Mary believed that raising public awareness and persistent lobbying of the authorities would result in tangible progress in the lived experiences of older people. However, she reflected later that this was naïve because a stronger and better-networked organisation was required to build greater solidarity among this group and to create the powerful force needed to bring about meaningful improvements on the ground. For example, she believed that some oversight mechanism or ombud was required at the local level to protect older people who were subject to abuse, but this was rejected by the government.

Mary was also committed to working at the community level and willing to put in the hard slog to help people become better organised. For example, she set up the Muizenberg Housing Savings Scheme to assist domestic workers who were forced to travel long distances each day from the Cape Flats. She identified potential sites for self-build housing and then systematically engaged all the key local, provincial, and national authorities to secure access to at least one of these land parcels. However, after years of lobbying, these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

Throughout her life Mary remained deeply committed to the cause of social justice, and to doing whatever she could whenever she encountered adversity, unfairness, and inequality, whether this was writing letters to the press, undertaking acts of charitable giving, or helping to unlock resources through leveraging her personal contacts. She possessed great emotional intelligence and formed enduring relationships with people from all walks of life. She was a person of enormous integrity, generosity, selflessness, and humility, and was always



determined to try to improve the lives and dignity of those subjected to misery and marginalisation, especially by empowering them to control their lives and claim their rights. For this she remains an inspiration to many family members, friends, and acquaintances.

There was a vitality, sparkle and honesty to Mary right to the end. At Ben's memorial in 2020 she spoke out about the unfinished struggle for emancipation, and gently reminded people to become more active in playing their part: "We have to spend the last years of our lives fighting for what we've neglected. And looking round this room, I can see that many of us don't have much time left."

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

*I am very grateful to many people, friends and acquaintances for sharing their memories of Mary, including Albie Sachs for his vivid recollection of events in the 1950s. A short version of this tribute was published in the Daily Maverick.*

### **BIOGRAPHY**

*Professor Ivan Turok holds the SA NRF Research Chair in City-Region Economies at the University of the Free State and was Executive Director at the Human Sciences Research Council (HRSC). Before that he was a professor at the universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde. Among other leadership positions, he serves as a board member of the Institute for African Alternatives (IFAA).*