

# Constitution Hill

## Journey from abuse to protection of human rights

It seems fitting on the 10th anniversary of the South African Constitution to take a look at a powerful museum situated on a prison site in Johannesburg. Here human rights abuses abounded but it now lies alongside the Constitutional Court, a symbol of new beginnings. **Solly Setlhako** talks about Constitution Hill and of his own journey to become one of its guides.



Constitution Hill is the new home of the Constitutional Court built on the site of the Old Fort prisons, with a history dating back to 1892. The prisons have become a major tourist attraction as they tell the story of the site. Constitution Hill represents South Africa's remarkable transition from apartheid to democracy. The heart of the site is the transformation of a place where human rights were brutally denied into a place where human rights are protected.

The heritage site was first built as a prison, which to many was simply known as Number Four. I first heard about Number Four in

1985, when I came to Johannesburg to further my studies. Number Four was notorious as a jail at the time.

The 1980s was a period during which South Africa was at the height of the struggle for freedom following in the path of the bus boycotts of the 1940s, the anti-pass campaigns of the 1950s, the student uprisings of the 1970s and the workers' stayaways and mass mobilisations of the 1980s led by the Mass Democratic Movement. Like many of the country's jails, Number Four swelled with ordinary prisoners, as well as anti-apartheid activists.

The jail was particularly notorious owing to the brutality

meted out to prisoners who were held there. Almost everyone knew about the prison or someone who was jailed or once jailed there. Number Four (or The Fort as it was known) was held in the imagination of every South African who came to Johannesburg from the Gold rush of 1886, characterised by the cheap migrant labour system, to the time when the jail was closed in 1983.

A memorable experience for me was when in 1986, I was part of a student meeting at Wits, which was declared an illegal gathering. I was arrested with a group of students, and many amongst them said we were being taken to Number Four.



It was only when I first visited Number Four, when the jailed re-opened to the public, that I realised that in fact we were jailed at the Hillbrow holding cells and not at Number Four. That made my first visit to Constitution Hill so emotional. It was as though I had been jailed there!

Another very memorable experience for me was in March 2004 when I first met some of the former prisoners who were jailed at Number Four. I met them during the process of transforming the jail into a museum. It was an emotional, yet inspiring moment for me as I heard one former prisoner after another recount their personal experiences in the jail. At the time I was one of a group of tour guides who had been on a six month training programme to become site tour guides at Constitution Hill.

Their stories reminded me of when I first came to Johannesburg and heard of Number Four from a late uncle, who worked in Johannesburg and lived in a male only hostel in Dube, Soweto. He told me of how people used to live in fear of the police who would come in the middle of the night looking for permits and how those who failed to produce them would be loaded into huge police trucks and taken to Number Four. "Once you arrived at Number Four, you would be cruelly and brutally punished," he recounted. He told me about how the system of Pass Laws controlled the movement of black people from the rural

hinterland of the country to the urban areas, which required that every black person carry a Pass Book. Those who came to Johannesburg had to have their Passes endorsed to allow them to be in the city, while those who worked late had to carry a special permit allowing them to be in the city at night. He recounted how the streets of Johannesburg were always under a heavy police presence as they patrolled to enforce the Pass Laws. Any black person could be randomly stopped and asked to produce their Pass.

My uncle's stories among others tell how The Fort was used to suppress the aspirations of the majority of the people of South Africa to have their human rights and freedoms protected. Constitution Hill is symbolic of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and the collective will of the people of South Africa for political, social and economic freedom.

Working at Constitution Hill first as a tour guide and as an education coordinator has been for me a wonderful experience. Most who come to Constitution Hill say they feel inspired by the fact that a prison with a history of such brutality has been transformed into a shining example of what constitutional democracy is all about. They go away with a feeling of pride about what we stand for as a people.

The site is an open heritage that belongs to all the people of South



No 4 prison at Constitution Hill

Africa. The museum is open for guided tours for members of the public, while the education programme is designed for educators and school learners.

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*The Constitution Hill museum conducts guided tours at 1 Kotze Street, Braamfontein, Johannesburg (next to the Civic Centre). It costs R15 for adults, R10 for students and R15 (including educational material) for school learners. Free guided tours are available on Tuesdays. For bookings and further information phone (011) 381-3100*

*Solly Setlbako is studying towards a master's degree in Tourism Development at the University of the Witwatersrand. It was during his studies that he learnt of developments at Constitution Hill and attempts to turn it into a heritage site. His keen interest in the prison led him to become part of the research team that explored the feasibility of developing the heritage and education component of the site.*