

# Mama Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti

14 September 1925 – 11 May 2015

**Mama Ruth: The quintessential human being;  
A worthy and inspiring leader, and a comforter.**

Mama Ruth, Sis Ruth, Auntie Ruth, Mme Ruta and Mane, as she was affectionately known, was a nurturer, a guardian and a selfless principled leader. She was a firm, strict but structured, balanced and gentle human being who was also a devout Christian. She was a loving mother and grandmother to all and always carried herself elegantly.

True to her name Segomotsi, which means 'Comforter' in Setswana, she was to play the role of mother, aunt, sister, friend and grandmother to the hundreds of young and old who found themselves separated from their own as a result of apartheid brutality.

## Early life

Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti was born in Ganyesa Village in the District of Vryburg in present-day North West on 14 September 1925. She grew up in Tlapeng, a rural environment in Ganyesa (now Kagisano). Between 1933 and 1936, she attended United Vryburg Primary School. From 1937 to 1940 she attended United Vryburg Higher Primary School, where she completed Standard Six.

Two years later, she enrolled at the Tiger Kloof Educational Institution, where she received her Native Lower Primary Certificate. She started her teaching career at Dithakwaneng Primary School near Vryburg in 1944 at the age of 19. In 1948 she was transferred to United School in Vryburg, where she continued her teaching career. When she got married in 1952 she lost her job as a teacher because the apartheid laws regulated that married black female teachers were not allowed to teach.

## Work in the African National Congress (ANC) and exile

Mama Ruth moved to Johannesburg in 1952 and it was at this stage that she officially joined the ANC and was a member of the Orlando branch. In 1953 she was employed as a Secretary by the first black law partnership of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo – Attorneys at Law. In the words of the late President of the ANC, Tambo, (known for his perfectionist approach on anything): "Sis Ruth is the best secretary we had".

In 1954, she became a member of the National Executive Committee (NEC) of the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) and, together with Helen Joseph and Lillian Ngoyi, was among the founding members of the Federation of South African Women.

Mama Ruth was one of the central figures in organising the historic 9 August 1956 march by over 20 000 women of all races to the Union Buildings in Pretoria. This show of force to demonstrate against extension of the hated pass books for women was honoured by the day being declared National Women's Day by the democratic



government. As an active member of the ANC, Mama Ruth also received the unwelcome attention of the apartheid regime's Security Police. When the ANC was banned in 1960, the law firm for which she worked underwent complete transformation. Tambo was assigned the task of leaving the country to mobilise international solidarity and Mandela was detained for five months in terms of the State of Emergency the regime declared after the Sharpeville Massacre. Mama Ruth, working under the direction of Moses Kotane, was among the group of cadres who set about reorganising the ANC as an underground movement.

Mama Ruth went into exile in neighbouring Botswana (then known as Bechuanaland) for a planned mission of a few months. While she was in exile, the South African police arrested top ANC leaders during a raid of the underground headquarters of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in Rivonia, Johannesburg. The ANC decided it was too risky for her to return. She was amongst the first women to join MK and underwent military training in the Soviet Union in 1963. While in exile she held office as Secretary and Head of the Women's Section of the ANC.

Between 1966 and 1973, she served on the Executive Committee of the Women's Section of the ANC. During 1966, she was transferred to the ANC's office in Zambia, but continued commuting between Tanzania and Zambia during the course of her work in ANC President Tambo's office.



## Mompati – the global activist for women’s rights

In 1976 the ANC sent Mama Ruth to represent South African women at the Women’s International Democratic Federation (WIDF). It was while in that role that she again displayed immense leadership roles in the struggles of women, children and oppressed peoples of the world. She fought fiercely for the struggles of the people of Palestine, Western Sahara and other areas of conflict. She used that time to forge close ties with the World Federation of Democratic Youth and the World Federation of Trade Unions. Mme Ruth and her colleagues at the WIDF coined the theme of the Decade for Women (1980-1990), which was **Equality, Development and Peace**.

One of Mama Ruth’s more prominent roles was as Head of the ANC’s Board of Religious Affairs. Returning from that posting, the ANC appointed her as its Chief Representative in the United Kingdom and Western Europe between 1981 and 1983. She returned to Lusaka to serve in the Executive of the Women’s Section and worked with the religious community.

When the ANC met for its Second National Consultative Conference at Kabwe, Zambia in June 1985, Mama Ruth was elected to the NEC. In that capacity, she was appointed to serve as Administrative Secretary in the Secretary-General’s Office and onto the four-person Secretariat that coordinated the work of the NEC. Her performance in that role earned her promotion to Joint Secretary of the Politico-Military Council (PMC) in 1988. Mama Ruth’s role was to coordinate the internal underground work of the movement during those most critical years.

## Homecoming and role in government

In 1990, she was chosen to be part of the ANC delegation that negotiated the peaceful transition with the government of FW de Klerk at Groote Schuur. At the ANC’s 48th conference, the first to be held in South Africa in 30 years, she was re-elected to the NEC. In 1993 she was re-elected as the National Executive Member of the ANCWL.

She addressed the United Nations (UN) Special Committee against Apartheid in August 1992 on the subject of Women. The UN declared the day an International Day of Solidarity with Women in South Africa.

Mama Ruth participated fully in the PMC of ANC branches in Johannesburg and in the various towns of what became the North West and Northern Cape respectively. She was instrumental in ensuring that Sol Plaatje’s house was purchased for preservation. Today Sol Plaatje’s house is a library, a museum and a heritage site. As a result of Mama Ruth’s efforts, two municipalities were named after struggle icons, John Taolo Gaetsewe and Joe Morolong. She was also one of the people, together with the late Mittah Seperepere, involved in establishing the Helen Joseph Women’s Development Centre.

In 1994 she was elected to the National Assembly and served as a Member of Parliament from 1994 to 1996. From 1996 to 2000, she served as Ambassador to Switzerland.

In recognition of her exemplary service to her people, the North-West University in 1996 awarded Mama Ruth an Honorary Master’s degree in Education. The then Medical University of South Africa (now called Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University) also awarded her an Honorary Doctorate later.

In 1996 Mama Ruth was invited by the University of Texas in the United States of America to deliver a lecture on the role of the ANC in the peaceful transition to a democratic South Africa. The Huston-Tillotson University, Austin, Texas, established a scholarship in her name: the Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati Scholarship Fund. Several beneficiaries of that scholarship went to study abroad and qualified with various degrees.

On her return to her hometown, Vryburg in 2000, she found a community divided along racial lines. The ANC deployed her to contest the position of Mayor of Naledi Local Municipality and she

won with a handsome majority. She did an excellent job uniting the people of Naledi Local Municipality, which later honoured her by erecting a bust statuette for her efforts to consolidate the vision of a free society in the country she helped liberate. She served two terms in the Mayoralty after which she left full-time political deployment, but continued to serve the community in various capacities.

As Mayor of Naledi Local Municipality, she established a twinning arrangement with Assen Gemeente (Community) in the Netherlands that still holds her in high esteem.

On 28 February 2007, the Bophirima District Council adopted Resolution 2007/11, renaming the municipality after her in recognition of her dedication towards the emancipation of all South Africans.

Mama Ruth served on many boards, including the Swiss-South Africa Corporative Initiative Trust, of which she was chairperson and the Tiger Kloof Board of Trustees, an institution she helped re-establish after it was closed down in the 1950s.

She was the Godmother of SAS Manthatisi (S101), named after Manthatisi, the warrior queen of the Batlokwa during the early 19th century. She had the honour of commissioning the craft in 2005.

## Family and community life

In 2009, using the facilities of the old Vryburg Hospital, she initiated the establishment of a donor-funded hospice, which continues provide care to terminally ill patients. To ensure that her legacy lives on long after she is gone, Mama Ruth established the Ruth Segomotsi Mompati Foundation to focus on the following key areas:

- Educational upliftment.
- Women empowerment.
- Reconciliation among different races.
- HIV and AIDS awareness, prevention and treatment.
- Arts, culture and heritage.

## Awards and honours received

For her role in the Struggle, she received the following honours:

- Human Rights and Democracy Award in 2004.
- Citation: Military Award: Platinum Class 2 for Distinguished Contribution in the Struggle, conferred by President Jacob Zuma in 2010.
- Isithwalandwe/Seaparankwe on behalf of the ANC conferred by President Zuma in 2014.
- Mahatma Gandhi Satyagraha Award in 2014.
- Special Award for contribution to Freedom and Human Rights by the Black Management Forum in 2014.
- Ubuntu: Oliver Tambo Lifetime Achievement Award conferred by President Zuma in 2015.

Mama Ruth was blessed with two sons, Mompati and Galeitsiwe (Tebogo), who were both also involved in the liberation struggle. Unfortunately they passed on before her. She is survived by her niece Sindi, grandchildren Boitumelo, Neo (junior), Neo (senior), Sindi (junior) Themmani, Themba, Makhosi and Buhle, together with scores of children that she nurtured as her own.

*Tsamaya sentle Kgabo Mokgatla wa ga 'Ma Naana.  
Magadimana ntweng! Majakgomo a sa gadime!*

## Hamba Kahle Mkhonto

“There are people who struggle for a day; and that is good;  
There are people who struggle for a year; and that is better;  
There are people who struggle many years, and that is better still;  
But there are those who struggle all their lives: those are the  
indispensable ones.”

(“In Praise of Fighters” song from the play “The Mother” 1930) –  
Bertolt Brecht.