

FROM DOCTOR TO DIPLOMAT

Konji Sebati grew up in a South Africa mired in racial tension yet went on to study medicine, appreciate jazz and become a diplomat. She is so energetic it would seem her best is yet to come.

WORDS: THOBILE HANS

YOU WOULD EXPECT AN INTERNATIONAL civil servant to be accompanied by an entourage of sharp-suited officials.

But Konji Sebati, a medical doctor and South Africa's former ambassador to Switzerland and France, does not need them – she is a one-woman army, with no airs and no private staff; she even responds to emails herself.

Perhaps this can be traced to her humble beginnings in Orlando West, Soweto. Her mother, Anna, did not want her only daughter to grow up in this Johannesburg township where criminals had murdered her husband when he was 36 on his way home from work. Sebati was only six and Anna was pregnant with her third child at the time.

So after primary school, Sebati was dispatched to boarding school in Bela-Bela, in Limpopo, a province north of South Africa. Following her matric, she enrolled at the University of Turfloop in Limpopo.

"It wasn't my plan [to go to Turfloop] because I wanted to go to medical school but it was very difficult in those days to go to a medical school as a black person," says Sebati.

"We had only one black medical school which covered Africans, Indians and Coloureds. They took about hundred students a year from millions of entries. You really had to be competitive, even if you had a few A's, you weren't guaranteed a place. Even the intake was still biased towards Indians, Coloureds and then blacks last," says Sebati.

Despite it not being her first choice, Sebati settled for a Bachelor of Science degree, majoring in Physiology and Zoology. The student politics at this all-blacks university was robust.

"It was a very interesting time politically. Turfloop was a hub of political conscientization, we were contemporaries with Terror Lekota, Mathews Phosa, Aubrey Mokoena and Cyril Ramaphosa and many others," says Sebati.



Two years into her degree, she was initiated into the world of student politics at a graduation ceremony. On April 29, 1972, a student leader, Onkgopotse Tiro, delivered an inflammatory speech on behalf of the students. It resulted in chaos.

Below is a paragraph of the speech sourced from *South African History Online*: "There's virtually and actually nothing to thank the Bantu Education for I have been asked to come and thank you, but there's nothing to thank you because our parents are not even in the hall. Most of them are standing outside and other people are basically the relatives of the lecturers who are predominantly white are here enjoying the activities of the graduation ceremony. The Bantu system is very poisonous and we are not really impressed with it and the day of liberation is going to come and when that day comes not even the military of this country is going to stop it," said Tiro, who was later expelled by the university. Tiro was killed in exile after a few months of being a fugitive.

Sebati says the speech was incredibly brave for its time.

"He said it as it was. And of course that caused a lot of riots after the graduation... Tiro managed to run away. Of course the university closed for about six months and that caused a bit of disruption."

It was a landmark moment in the lives of many students who had listened to Tiro that day. Thankfully, there were other distractions.

In September that year, the Students Representative Council organized the annual Africa Arts Week. Prominent leaders such as Bokwe Mafuna, Barney Pityana, Steve Biko, Wally Serote, Lefifi Tladi, Mamphele Ramphele, Siphosiphiso Sepamla and Don Mattera arrived with their renditions of political poetry.

"We were conscientized about where the country should be. Everyone in Turfloop was conscientized, even if they didn't end up as politicians. There wasn't opportunity not to be because you were surrounded by this atmosphere of realization of who we truly are and our roots," she recalls fondly.

Sebati finished her degree and went on to start a career at Adcock Ingram Pharmaceuticals. She still yearned to be a doctor, a career her father aspired for but he died a health supervisor. When the government allowed a small number of African students to register at white universities, Sebati was among the first to seize the opportunity. She was accepted at the University of the Witwatersrand to study medicine, but

the opportunity had roadblocks.

"After you have been accepted by the university, you then have to write to the Minister of Interior to ask for permission to enrol at the white university. I applied but unfortunately the response said 'yes you have done particularly well

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but you won't be studying medicine, you will study dentistry'. I said 'hell no, I don't want to do dentistry'. I refused."

She started applying for international scholarships. By sheer coincidence, her mother, who was a nurse at Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg, had a patient who put Sebati in contact with the dean of the medical school at the University of Nairobi in Kenya.

Then everything just fell into place.

Sebati, a jazz fanatic, had at the time applied for a passport for a jazz tour in Montreal, Canada, with a South African band but the concert was called off following the June 16, 1976 student uprising.

The United Nations Educational and Training Programme for Southern Africa (UNEPSA) had committed to fund her studies in any African university.

Two months after the uprising, Sebati was reading for her MBChB degree in Kenya. She said the turn of events was a blessing in disguise.

Soon after she left for Kenya, the police raids started at her home. The police thought she was one of the many political

exiles who fled the country to join the ranks of banned political parties at the time such as the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress.

"The police came home asking my mother and brothers where I was. The usual knocking at the door at 4AM with dogs and drama. They demanded to know how I got the passport. Obviously, they watched my moves," says Sebati.

This impasse was to last until she finished her degree. Sebati worked at Kenyatta Hospital when she couldn't go home. She was afraid police were going to interrogate her about her contacts with friends who were in political exile in Swaziland and Botswana since she had traveled there many times. She supported exiled friends with food and clothes. But there was always going to be a reason to face her fears head on.

"My elder brother had passed away in 1983. I had finished my degree and was working in Nairobi. There was no way I was not going to bury my brother. I said South Africa is what it is, I don't care what they do to me. I am coming home."

Finally, she bought the ticket to South Africa and there was nothing, not even rogue cops, who could stop her from burying her brother.

"There was only one black man on the plane with me. I went to him and said I have been away from home for many years. I don't know what will happen to me when I land. I told him there will be only one family at the customs and that will be my family. Tell them I was on the plane with you, in case I disappear. My heart was thumping but it was a relief to get out and meet my family," says Sebati.

Thereafter, she settled in Bophuthatswana, now North West province, a self-governed Bantustan under Lucas Mangope.

Sebati's career progressed in the Bantustan more than it could have in South Africa. She was appointed health superintendent overseeing many hospitals and clinics.

After three decades between the public and private sector, Sebati also had a stellar diplomatic career. In 2004, when she was a senior executive in medical and corporate affairs at Pfizer Pharmaceutical Company based in New York, the then President of democratic South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, appointed her ambassador in Switzerland and later moved her to France until she quit in 2010 after Mbeki resigned.

Among other accolades, the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation recognized Sebati as the most outstanding woman in the fight against HIV/AIDS in 2004.

The 66-year-old jazz lover and mother of two daughters – an architect and artist – served for the World Intellectual Property Organisation in Geneva.

She has been chief executive of Innovative Pharmaceutical Association of South Africa since late 2014 and also serves on the board of Medicines for Malaria Venture.

Sebati overcame trials and tribulations in an apartheid South Africa to become a doctor, but to the world, she has always been an ambassador of her people. **FW**