

People

Rifat Turk

Scoring for Arab Israelis



Rifat Turk

A beloved soccer star who has become the first Arab Israeli to serve as a deputy mayor in his country, 47-year-old Rifat Turk has had a life of

surprising transformations.

If anyone had told the 16-year-old boy kicking a soccer ball around Jaffa's back alleys that he would become a national sports star and the first Arab Israeli to represent his country in the Olympic Games, Turk probably would have laughed in his face.

The son of a Jaffa fisherman, Turk had dropped out of school in eighth grade. Like many of his friends, he spent his days hanging around the port of Jaffa, playing soccer along its ancient streets. Unlike many teenagers in neighboring Tel Aviv, these boys did not have rosy futures. Nobody seemed to care much if they cut school or ended up in juvenile detention.

The appearance of a soccer scout changed all of that for Turk. He was recruited to play for Tel Aviv's Hapoel team and became a star midfield player who soon advanced to Israel's national team. There, his wide smile and engaging personality won him legions of fans, both Jewish and Arab. He represented Israel in the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal and in 1980 was named Israel's soccer player of the year.

In 1987, Turk retired from the soccer field. He spent the next decade coaching and managing Jewish and Arab teams across Israel while also working on a cause close to his heart: keeping Jaffa youth away from crime and drugs.

It was this work that kick-started his career in politics. Turk says that 90 percent of his childhood friends are on the street, on drugs, or in prison, and that many of Jaffa's youth are headed for the same fate. In an effort to use his voice on their behalf, he ran for a slot on Tel Aviv's city council under the

Meretz party banner in 1998. He won and, after five years on the council, was elected to replace deputy mayor Michal Roeh in March 2003. He is the first Arab Israeli to hold such a high-ranking post in local government.

As deputy mayor, Turk hopes that he will be able to make a real difference in Jaffa, where poverty and illiteracy hold many citizens back.

To illustrate his goals, he uses a sports metaphor: Once, he says, Third World teams routinely lost by wide margins to the more advantaged European teams in soccer's World Cup. "Now, over the years, they have slowly learned what is going on, and the gaps have gotten smaller and smaller. I want to see the gaps between Tel Aviv and Jaffa narrow in the same way." —SARAH COLEMAN

Zackie Achmat

An Issue of Conscience

For 40-year-old AIDS campaigner

Zackie Achmat, victory over an insidious disease is both personal and intensely political.

There are surely few people who would refuse a personal request from Nelson Mandela. Yet in December 2002, when Mandela turned to Zackie Achmat at a Johannesburg reception and implored him to "Give me, as an old man, your promise that you will now take your medicine," Achmat looked into the television cameras present and said "No."

It wasn't the first time that Achmat has publicly refused treatment for his HIV infection. As the acting chairman of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), South Africa's leading AIDS lobbying group, Achmat has often said that he won't take anti-retroviral drugs until they are available and affordable for all South Africans. His unwavering stance has won him the label of "national hero" from none

other than Mandela—and it has directly influenced the administration's AIDS policy.

Dismayed by President Mbeki's contention that HIV does not cause AIDS, the TAC under Achmat and Mark Heywood's leadership brought major court cases against both the pharmaceutical industry and the South African government in 2001. As a result, multinational companies agreed to lower their drug prices in South Africa and the government was ordered to make anti-retrovirals available nationwide. A 2001 documentary about Achmat, *It's My Life*, records these historic battles.

An activist since childhood, Achmat grew up in a Muslim community in Cape Town, and at the age of 14 became a leader in the 1976 anti-apartheid school boycotts. By the age of 18, he had been jailed five times for actions against the regime, including setting fire to his school. Freed in 1980, he took to political organizing and in the early 1990s, founded South Africa's National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality. There, he fought several landmark anti-discrimination cases in the Constitutional Court, and won.

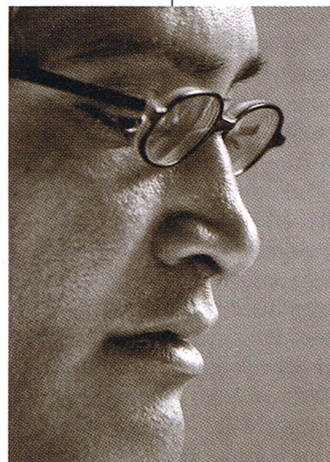
Despite the TAC's recent victories, Achmat feels progress on HIV/AIDS

in South Africa is too slow. Medication remains unavailable in some provinces, and the government has yet to sign a national treatment plan for those with HIV/AIDS. Until it does, Achmat won't yield, and he has promised a campaign of civil disobedience if the plan is not signed by April 2003. "It is a personal issue of conscience," he told South Africa's gay magazine *Q*. "I have become middle class

but my brothers are working class...if they were infected they could not afford the medicines."

If Achmat's record of success is any guide, he might not have to say "no" to Nelson Mandela for much longer.

—SARAH COLEMAN



AFP Photo/Anna Zieminski