

Overwhelmed by wasted lives

CAPE TIMES

HOW CAN MAN DIE BETTER:

Sobukwe and Apartheid

by Benjamin Pogrund

Peter Halban

COULD be subtitled "Sobukwe and Pogrund". Pogrund knew Robert Sobukwe well; he regarded him as a brother. Benjamin Pogrund has for many years been a pillar of the liberal press in South Africa. He makes it clear that he sees Sobukwe as the towering figure of African liberation policies. Certainly for a brief time he held South Africa in his hand and his influence on Biko and others was immense. Yet his Africanist movement has lost ground and his tactics at the time of Sharpeville were probably mistaken.

There can be no doubt, however, that Sobukwe was a man of spellbinding charm and intellect. He endured with great fortitude his long imprisonment on Robben Island, where he was kept year after year

by successive parliaments in defiance of justice. The reverence in which he was held by other prisoners is quite extraordinary, as is the ambivalence of his custodians. But this book is perhaps most fascinating for its sensitive account of Sobukwe's feelings about individuals, history, politics, literature and the nature of ideas.

These deeply human preoccupations appear to have superseded his earlier, narrower, belief in Africanism. And Pogrund often points out the central irony of Sobukwe's life, namely that he was completely colour blind, while being regarded by whites as a devil incarnate. The scenes at Sobukwe's funeral where the comrades prevented both Helen Suzman and Pogrund speaking, despite the wishes of his family (and incidentally came very close to murdering Chief Buthelezi), would have offended Sobukwe deeply.

The essence of Africanism is that cooperation with the whites will lead inevitably to compromise. It is a theoretical posi-

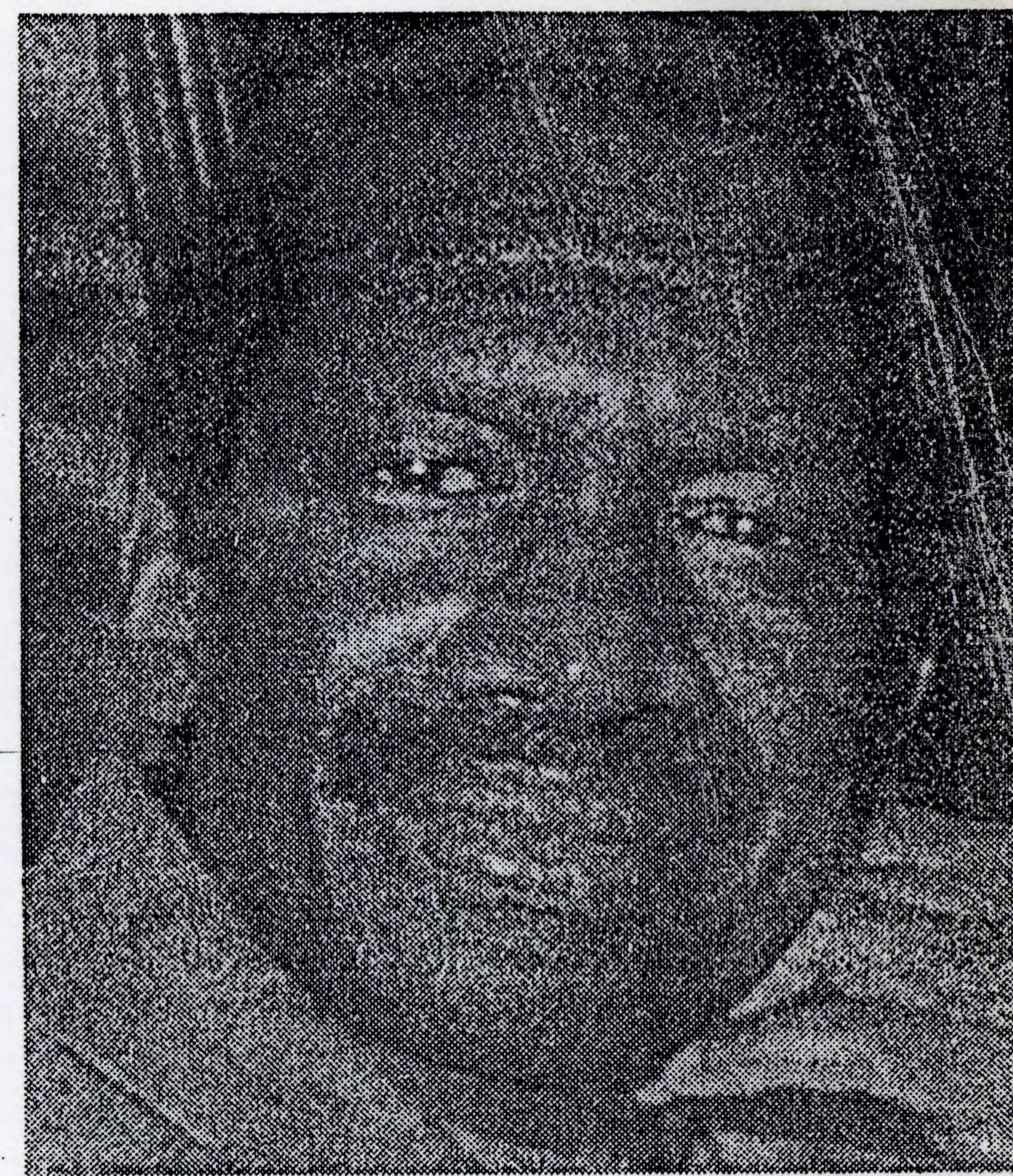
tion which in practice is as impossible to maintain as apartheid. Certainly Sobukwe's life shows this. South Africa will never know what it may have lost with his early death from lung cancer.

Reading this book produces an overwhelming sense of the waste of lives and opportunities which has been the history of South Africa, particularly in the last 40 years. There have been 18 million pass-law arrests and 3,5 million forced removals in that time in the name of a policy that is now being junked.

The futility and the cruelty of it all is mitigated only by the stories of individual fortitude, perseverance and principle which, such is the nature of human striving, run through it. Even as most of the white leaders of South Africa had forgotten it, most of South Africa's black leaders kept faith with human worth. They were the real standard bearers of "Western values" through the dark years.

Justin Cartwright

By arrangement with the Daily Telegraph



Robert Sobukwe — a man of spellbinding charm

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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