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Oliver Tambo

This man Oliver Tambo, popularly known as O.R. holds a prime place in the ranks of those who have brought the transformation of South Africa.

Many outstanding people drove the struggle for national liberation forward. But a remarkable triumvirate of Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Tambo played the key role in shaping that movement, in formulating its political direction, and in making it receptive to necessary changes as the struggle developed.

O.R. was sent abroad by the ANC after the Sharpeville massacre of 1960, in anticipation of its banning. The organisation wanted to establish a secure base outside the country. The task fell to O.R. It was the beginning of a thirty-year odyssey, of a life of unending travel and ceaseless lobbying for the South African cause. For all those years, he was the leading ambassador for the people of South Africa, spokesman for the silenced majority, messenger of the truth about apartheid which, for many years, the outside world would not believe, and often did not care to hear.

At the same time, he was the builder of the ANC's external mission, first in London, then in Dar es Salaam, in Morogoro, and finally - until February 1990 - in Lusaka. From that mission there grew a united and ultimately an effective liberation movement.

To those who knew him, those who worked with him, those who met him on his world-wide travels or who heard him speak in public places, O.R. had a strong fatherly image. He was charming, warm and approachable, without either flamboyance or aggressiveness. Some took this for simplicity of character.

In fact he was a complex man of many contradictions. He was a committed African nationalist. His role in the 1944 formation of the ANC Youth League (together with Mandela, Sisulu, Lembede, Ngubane, Sobukwe and others) helped bring a new vibrant nationalism to an ANC which had become mired in outworn and ineffectual activities. The Youth League revitalised the ANC and fundamentally changed its direction. Yet this ardent nationalist became the main ANC missionary to the white Western world, proclaiming the virtue of a non-racial future for his country.

He adhered unswervingly to the ANC's non-racial orientation, against the expressed hostility that existed at that time within many African states and in the O.A.U. who preferred what they considered the "purer" black nationalism of the P.A.C. The ANC and its spokesman ~~endured~~ ^{suffered} a long period in which they were out of favour almost everywhere; but they endured and eventually emerged triumphant and acclaimed.

O.R., was a mission-educated Christian who once hoped to become an Anglican priest. Yet he was able to work amicably with people of all faiths and none, with communists, conservatives and atheists as well as those who rejected all nationalism. Despite his own strongly held views, his intellectual honesty combined with a patient ^{willingness} ~~capacity~~ to listen to others gave him the capacity to put aside his own prejudices, and to change his stance when he was convinced it was right.

It was his extraordinary ability to unite so many disparate opinions and groups that enabled the ANC in exile to survive the corrosion and the destructive personal conflicts that are a common fate of exiled political communities, and to grow to resurgence and ultimate triumph.

O.R. worked tirelessly, travelled endlessly. He had virtually no home life, no rest. He lived for the cause of South African liberation. And his single-minded dedication of all his strength and time to the cause fatally undermined his health. Though he returned triumphantly to South Africa in 1990 he was physically ~~broken~~^{weakened}. And ~~shortly after his return~~, he died. In April 1993

Of O.R. it can be truly be said, he gave his life for his country~~and~~ and ~~its~~^{its} liberation. His contribution should never be underestimated. It must never be forgotten.

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