

REVIEW

'HOW CAN MAN DIE BETTER...' by BENJAMIN POGRUND

This is a book that deserves a far wider readership than it is likely to receive. Outside South Africa, and even inside, Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the Pan Africanist Congress, is little known today other than as another martyr to apartheid. Even in his relatively short life, much of which was spent in jail or banishment, Sobukwe operated in the shadow of more famous black leaders. Had he lived, Sobukwe would be 66 years old. Given the clarity of his vision of a future South Africa, his strength of character and his ability to lead and to inspire others even in the worst of times, it is hard to imagine that the PAC would now be struggling on the margins as the old order crumbles.

Sobukwe's reputation has been marred by some fanciful claims put about by the South African authorities and his black critics --that he favoured violence, that he was anti-white, that he was a communist extremist and so on. One of the merits of Benjamin Pogrund's affectionate book is the clarity with which he sets the record straight. In 1991 it is hard to read about Sobukwe without wondering what might have been. Pogrund makes it abundantly clear that Sobukwe stood resolutely for a non-racial South Africa. Sobukwe himself put it like this in an article written in 1959: "We stand for government of the Africans for the Africans by the Africans with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Africa and accepts the democratic rule of an African majority, being regarded as an African."

'How Can Man Die Better...' is not, however, a conventional biography. Pogrund calls it "a personal memoir," and that is an apt characterisation. Certainly, no one else could have written this revealing, and at times intensely sad, account of Sobukwe's ill-starred life. Above all, it is a record of a rare, and often touching, relationship between a radical black politician struggling to stay afloat during the worst excesses of the apartheid era and a white, liberal South African journalist whose professional duties on the 'Rand Daily Mail' first brought him into contact with Sobukwe. The miserable history of South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s resonates through every page in this book; if for nothing else Sobukwe will be remembered for the infamous 'Sobukwe Clause' which allowed the Verwoerd government to keep anyone jailed of a political offence in prison year by year on the order of the Justice Minister alone. But what distinguishes Pogrund's memoir is the intimate correspondence between him and Sobukwe which began (apparently with the connivance of the South African authorities) soon after Sobukwe was jailed (for three years) in 1960 and lasted until his eventual release in 1969.

Such an extraordinary exchange can surely have few parallels in the history of prison literature. Sobukwe and Pogrund debated everything, from ideology and religion (the conception of heaven

troubled Sobukwe) to relations with women and the education of children. Many of the exchanges are reproduced in the book and will give the lie forever to the white-supremacist notion of inherited superiority. For Sobukwe, mostly kept apart from his fellow prisoners on Robben Island, the letters clearly acted as a kind of safety-valve through which he hung on to his sanity, latterly with some difficulty. For Pogrund, at large (and reporting) day-by-day in the madhouse of apartheid and often under stress himself, writing to Sobukwe and trying to deal with his everyday needs at first seems to have satisfied an ever-present desire to be of some practical help to someone less fortunate than himself. Later, one suspects, he came to value the intellectual dialogue for itself, however grotesque the circumstances.

And how Kafkaesque the circumstances could be! Pogrund often finds himself supping with the devil in his efforts to help Sobukwe. One particularly bizarre episode involves Hendrick van den Bergh, a feared policeman who had once arrested Pogrund himself and by then was the all-powerful head of the Bureau of State Security. Pogrund approaches van den Berg for permission to visit Robben Island to interview Sobukwe in connection with a history of communism in South Africa which he is writing at the time. Permission is given; the authorities, too, are keen to know Sobukwe's views.

In time Pogrund becomes an essential conduit for Sobukwe to the outside world. He arranges for books to be sent to Sobukwe which eventually lead on to an Honours degree in Economics from London University. He organises food parcels and clothing and often liases with Sobukwe's wife. And he constantly seeks funds to finance these activities. On Sobukwe's death in 1978 Pogrund is invited by the family to make a speech at the funeral. By then white liberals were almost as suspect in black militant circles as apartheid apologists. Pogrund is prevented from speaking--an action which was, as he puts it, "the negation of the non-racialism for which Robert Sobukwe stood" but perhaps the inevitable consequence of the growing violence and repression and polarisation in South Africa during the 1970s.

Sustaining the narrative for a book like this over nearly 400 pages is difficult, not least because most of the last two decades of Sobukwe's 54 years were spent in jail or internal exile out of the mainstream of South African life. Sobukwe's gentle, inquiring personality and total absence of self-pity helps a great deal. So do the ups and downs of Pogrund's own existence which inject a dose of everyday realism into Sobukwe's offshore world. The hazards of investigative journalism in South Africa frequently rear up and strike the reader, though they never take over. For anyone unfamiliar with the 'Rand Daily Mail' in its pomp under Laurence Gandar, Pogrund's account will offer invaluable insights.

Goodness, nobility of character, generosity of spirit and an abiding commitment to basic human rights are not qualities

outsiders usually associate with the squalor of the apartheid era. Benjamin Pogrund shows in 'How Can Man Die Better...' that such values survived among a select few of all races. His sensitive handling of a shameful, tragic story does justice to Robert Sobukwe's memory. Along the way he unwittingly exemplifies how it was possible to be white in South Africa during this period and to retain one's integrity.

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Robert Sobukwe Papers

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand

Location:- Johannesburg

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DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- A2618-Da15

Document Title:- Review (typed copy) by Robin Knight, U.S. News and World Report

Author:- Robin Knight, U.S. News and World Report

Document Date:- undated