

reality

MAY 1978

35 cents



A JOURNAL OF LIBERAL AND RADICAL OPINION

A TRIBUTE — that was never paid

The address BENJAMIN POGRUND would have delivered at ROBERT SUBUKWE'S funeral.

Robert Sobukwe. My brother and my friend.

It did not matter that our skins were of different colours; that we came from such different backgrounds — he from a woodcutter's home in this village, the descendant of people who have spent centuries in the African continent; me a first-generation African, from a middle-class home in Cape Town. It did not matter that we did not have the same father and mother. We grew to be brothers. Over a period of 20 years our relationship of love and caring developed and deepened.

That Bob Sobukwe saw me as his brother and that I saw him as my brother already tells a great deal about him and about the South Africa he believed in and wanted. A country without blacks or whites, but of human-beings. A country where racism will be outlawed.

Many words about the greatness of Bob Sobukwe are being spoken today. They are true words. Many wonderful words have been spoken about him since he passed away two weeks ago. They are true words.

It is tragic that, in his lifetime, so many in South Africa spurned him; that so much of what he had to offer us was suppressed and locked away — in Pretoria prison, on Robben Island Prison, in confinement and banning in Kimberley.

But the test of a man can be seen in what he leaves behind him, in what he has left for us who remain in this world.

And we have from Bob Sobukwe that belief in South Africa of which I spoke earlier. One united South Africa, free of colour or tribal divisions. A South Africa devoted to justice and democracy for all its peoples, without totalitarianism, communism or any other crushing of the human spirit. It was a dream in his lifetime; yet it is more than a dream because in it lies the future and the salvation of all of us.

In all the years of his life, Bob Sobukwe did not deviate a fraction from his belief and always he wanted it to come about in peace.

Going closely with this, what we have from him is a love of people.

He practised this in his life to an extent that was incredible to behold. Even for his oppressors, for those who held him captive, there was no bitterness or hatred. Only a sympathy for them, a pity for them because of the way they behaved.

When we were together, it was I who would express the resentment, the anger, at the way he was treated. He would simply be amused, tolerant about those who had done humiliating things to him.

I would feel ashamed and embarrassed, as a person and as a South African, about the things that were inflicted on him — whether the cruelty of forcibly keeping him year after year on Robben Island in isolation, or the ugliness of the apartheid system in forcing us, when I visited him in Kimberley, to go and drive out among the thorn bushes to seek shelter from the sun, drinking our cool drinks and eating our pies. It was one of our moments of joy when, after several years of doing this, we discovered a cafe that actually did not mind if we sat down together to share a pot of tea. Provided that we sat in the black section of the cafe.

For Bob Sobukwe these were things to be taken in his stride. To him, they were examples of the weakness of his oppressors, of the desperate and ugly things that they had to do to maintain themselves.

He rose above it all; he was the giant; those who tried to debase him were themselves debased.

Whenever, during the dark times of his life, I went to give him comfort, I came away amazed. Because it was not I that gave him comfort, but it was he who gave me comfort.

And even in the last few months of his life. He could not but know then that it was the bannings enforced on him, confining him to Kimberley, which had prevented him from travelling freely to obtain the specialised medical attention which could perhaps have prolonged his life. Even then he did not lash out, as a lesser person would so naturally have done.

Yet none of this, as we well know, meant that there was any trace of weakness in Bob Sobukwe. For what he has also given us is the example of his strength and courage in sticking to what he believed. He applied this to a super-human extent. He asked people to do only what he himself was prepared to do. He was the first to lead the way — and to accept the consequences of what he did.

Many years ago I shared in his dilemma when Rhodes University offered him a fulltime job as a lecturer. At that stage, Bob was called a "language assistant" at Witwatersrand University. Now he had the chance of a well paid, status position to do the teaching and the writing that he loved. But he turned it down. He decided that his task was to give himself to his people. And he stuck to that unwaveringly to the end of his life, never regretting, never complaining, never losing his faith in his mission and in God's purpose.

Bob Sobukwe has also given us his thinking. Under the laws at present inflicted on us, I cannot quote his words. Even in his death the Nationalists are so frightened of the power of his thinking that they cannot be directly referred to. But we all know that it was he who took the ideas of black consciousness — so vital towards the gaining of freedom for all our peoples — and developed and refined them.

He applied his intelligence and his perceptions to our problems. The philosophies he presented are still with us; they have been carried along by another generation.

It is because of his thinking and the way that he lived it out that he has been rightly described as the "father of our nation". That is the nation which will come in South Africa. When it does, it will be, more than to anyone else, a memorial to Bob Sobukwe.

As we mourn him today, we need also to think of his wife, Veronica. In the years of fighting and struggle, Veronica stood like a rock, always there, bringing up the children and giving support to her husband. She fought with him and for him.

As we share in her grief, we give her honour and admiration. She is the mother of the nation.

And Bob's children. What does one say to children — young adults — whose father has been such a mighty figure?

Their grief is our grief. We give them comfort as we seek comfort from who Bob Sobukwe was.

I grieve for my brother. South Africa grieves for its father, for this son of Africa.

Bob Sobukwe has passed away. But he lives. He is belief, love, hope — and a great gift to all who knew him or of him. □

PUBLISHER:

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

Location:- Johannesburg

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DOCUMENT DETAILS:

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Document ID:- A2618-Cd9

Document Title:- Reality magazine (original): articles about Sobukwe including 'A tribute -- that was never paid' by Benjamin Pogrund, letter (handwritten original) inside from 'Peter' (? Brown)

Author:- Benjamin Pogrund

Document Date:- May 1978