

## Inside Mail

# The last months of a sick man

ROBERT SOBUKWE was jailed in 1960 for three years for incitement following the anti-pass campaign launched by his organisation, the Pan-Africanist Congress. When his sentence ended he was taken to Robben Island Prison in terms of special legislation rushed through Parliament. He was kept there for the next six years, without trial.

In 1969 he was released. He was taken to Kimberley, a strange place to him. He was placed under night-time house arrest and banned — which meant among other things, that he could not leave Kimberley without permission.

During June and July last year, Mr Sobukwe was coughing a lot. The doctors he consulted in Kimberley could not do anything to help him. He thought he had flu. As a close friend in regular touch on the phone, I kept urging him to apply for permission to come to Johannesburg to see a specialist. When he finally did so, late in July, permission was refused.

I immediately went to Kimberley to see him, and was so worried about his condition that as soon as I returned home, I phoned the Minister of Justice, Mr Kruger, at his office.

It took several days to get hold of Mr Kruger. When I finally reached him he was helpful. Within the hour he phoned back to say Mr Sobukwe could come to Johannesburg to see a doctor. But not that weekend; it was too soon. It would have to be the week after.

It was agreed that Mr Sobukwe would arrive on a Saturday and stay overnight at my home, that he would not go anywhere except to see the specialist I had specified (a leading physician in the city), and that the only people whom I would allow at my home would be members of my immediate family.

These arrangements made, the situation later changed. First there was a stipulation, conveyed to Mr

Sobukwe some days later, that the specialist examine him in my house. I went back to Mr Kruger, explaining that the doctor needed the special equipment at his surgery for the examination. A flurry of phone calls, and the afternoon before Mr Sobukwe was due in Johannesburg the Security Police phoned me to say all right, he could go to the doctor's rooms after all. But straight from the rooms to my home.

At that stage I felt too intimidated to ask for permission for Mr Sobukwe to have X-rays taken in Johannesburg. It would have meant going to see another doctor. I was scared that if we asked for anything more, for another concession, the permission for him to come to Johannesburg might be withdrawn.

This may sound ridiculous. But it was the atmosphere in which I was operating. I was begging for favours, always aware that anywhere in the apparatus of power with which I was dealing someone could peremptorily say no.

Even my request for Mr Sobukwe to fly back to Kimberley at 3.30 pm on the Sunday instead of on the early flight was turned down — and it was done abrasively, with a curt warning that if I didn't like it, he would have to take an early Saturday afternoon flight.

So poor Bob, tired and ill, had to be up early on the Sunday for the 9.30 am plane.

X-rays were not available for the examination. We had not been able to obtain any from Kimberley. The specialist's diagnosis at that stage, based on the limited tools available to him, was that Mr Sobukwe was suffering from a weakening of the heart muscles caused by a bacterial infection. Alarming but not desperate. I sent the report to Mr

Kruger. About three weeks later, however, X-rays taken in Kimberley reached Johannesburg. The physician who had seen Mr Sobukwe diagnosed cancer. I was overseas at the time but when my wife gave me the news on the phone I told her to contact Mr Kruger to ensure that Bob Sobukwe could be free of restriction in being treated. Doctors were also in touch with Mr Kruger

A doctor who treated Robert Sobukwe says that the cancer from which he died on February 27 at the age of 53 was incurable; that, once found, it was too late to do anything about it.

That could be. But against it is the fact that, as a result of the bannings imposed on him since 1969, Mr Sobukwe could not at first freely seek medical advice. It was several months before his illness was properly diagnosed. By then it was certainly too late to save his life.

This the record of what happened, as told by **BENJAMIN POGRUND** who, as a close friend of nearly 20 years' standing, was personally involved in many of the events of the last months of Mr Sobukwe's life.



Robert Sobukwe . . . a photograph taken in Johannesburg last August, just before his fatal illness was diagnosed. Mr Sobukwe was at the home of Benjamin Pogrand, who is seen here with him.

the fact of Mr Sobukwe's ill health. Mr Sobukwe's illness should surely have been his own private concern until such time as he (or his family or close friends acting on his authority) chose to disclose it, I said.

Mr Kruger, on September 27, replied that he had issued his statement because background circumstances had warranted it, and that he had not in any event disclosed the

nature of the illness. He told me not to approach him directly again.

The day after Mr Sobukwe was admitted to Groote Schuur the Security Police arrive there.

They ordered the doctors not to allow Mr Sobukwe to have any visitors except his immediate family. The doctors were incensed at the intrusion and told the police that Mr Sobukwe was their patient and they would decide who he could or could not see.

From then on, during the weeks Mr Sobukwe spent in the hospital, there was a constant flow of visitors for him. Some were old friends; many were people from the townships who came along to pay their respects, often simply standing quietly at the door to look at him.

Friday, October 14, the day he was temporarily discharged from hospital a month after having had a lung removed, became a nightmare for him.

Eleven days before, Mrs Sobukwe had applied to the magistrate in Cape Town for permission for her husband to stay at the home of a relative — the Rt Rev Pat Matolengwe, Anglican Bishop Suffragan, or with a white friend. She twice inquired about the matter but received no reply. On October 12 Dr Alex Boraine MP took it up with Mr Kruger's secretary and was told the application had been referred to Kimberley, from where it

had been referred to Pretoria. No decision was yet available.

On October 13, Mrs Sobukwe was still phoning Kimberley's Security Police in an effort to find out what the position was.

At lunchtime on Friday, October 14 the Bishop fetched Mr Sobukwe from hospital and took him to his Newlands home. About an hour later, two security policemen arrived. Mrs Sobukwe says they demanded to see her husband. She told them he was in the toilet and asked them to sit down. But they tried to push past her to get to him. There was a scuffle which ended when Mr Sobukwe himself appeared. "My husband was a man of peace," Mrs Sobukwe explains.

The police presented an order from Mr Kruger: Mr Sobukwe either had to return to Kimberley or to hospital. Immediately.

He was weak and barely able to walk properly. It was his first day fully on his feet since the operation. Mrs Sobukwe begged that he be allowed to rest. He also had a dread of returning to hospital. Despite the outstanding attention and medical treatment he had there, the ward was confined and the windows faced on to an inner courtyard. He yearned for the sun.

The police asked the Bishop's secretary, who was present, to book seats on the first available flight to Kimberley. She refused. Mr Sobukwe was not fit to travel, she told them. The police themselves then phoned. The only flight that day was full, they found.

While Mrs Sobukwe tried to contact people who could help, the police left.

They phoned about an hour later to check if he was still there. Mr Sobukwe had no choice but to return to hospital that afternoon.

Dr Boraine again became involved. So did Prof Chris Barnard, who telephoned Mr Kruger and the Prime Minister, Mr Vorster.

On Saturday morning,

the first order was that Mr Sobukwe was not allowed to leave the hospital grounds. Then one of the doctors treating him received permission to take him for a drive. Then the doctor was given permission to take him to his home — and Mr Sobukwe was allowed to stay there. The next day the Security Police called there also.

But Mr Sobukwe could not remain at the house. Unfortunately, a few days before Mr Sobukwe had to be re-admitted to hospital, the doctor moved out of his house. Permission for Mr Sobukwe to stay with friends was refused. He was only allowed to stay at the Holiday Inn on the edge of the city. He and his wife moved in there.

After his second hospital stay, Mr Sobukwe went back to Kimberley. Early in January, he was due again at Groote Schuur. Again, he was not allowed to stay with friends but was required to stay at the Holiday Inn before going into hospital.

The Holiday Inn, however, said it did not have accommodation available.

What to do? Luckily, the doctor with whom he had previously stayed could once more offer his home.

The official document allowing Mr Sobukwe to go to Cape Town carried these stipulations:

Before leaving Kimberley he had to report to the Security Police. When he arrived in Cape Town he had to report to the police. On his discharge from hospital he had to return to Kimberley on the first available train (in practice, this could be a plane). He had to report his departure to the police in Cape Town, and his arrival to the police in Kimberley.

"He could hardly walk because of his backache," says Mrs Sobukwe. "Friends took us from the airport in Cape Town. He struggled to move slowly to the charge office to report that he was around. It was painful."

There was never an end to it. Only his death brought an end.



Robert Sobukwe Papers

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