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ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE:

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An address given at a memorial service and the unveiling of a tombstone in Graaff Reinet; Sunday August 15, 1982.

by Benjamin Pogrand

There is a story about Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe I want to share with you. During his banning and house arrest in Kimberley we were talking one day about his experiences on Robben Island Prison. He told me that a Minister of Justice — it was the late P C Pelser — had visited him at one stage and they had had a discussion.

What did you think of him? I asked. "I liked him," replied Bob. "He was an unprejudiced human-being."

I looked at Bob in astonishment. Here was he, a prisoner of the government under severe restriction orders in Kimberley; he had only recently emerged from nine years in jail, for most of the time without trial and never knowing when he would be released. Yet when confronted by a leading representative of the system which he had dedicated his life to overthrowing, he described him as an "unprejudiced human-being"!

But Bob, I protested, Pelser was the man who was signing the orders keeping you on Robben Island. "Yes," he said "but

he wasn't responsible for it; it was a decision taken by the Cabinet." But Bob, I said, when Pelser signed the orders it was part of the price he paid for his luxury motorcar, his official house, his nice salary and his position; he was a full party to the Cabinet decision.

Bob would not be swayed, however. Indeed he was rather irritated with me for pressing the matter. He had met Pelser, had like him as an individual, and went out of his way to defend him.

I have often thought about that conversation. Did it betray a weakness in Robert Sobukwe? For a man dedicated to the transformation of South African society, was he too soft towards his enemies?

No. That is too obvious and simplistic an answer. Instead, those who know him can attest to his strength of will. His entire life is testimony to his towering and abiding strength.

The answer lies rather in one of the most fundamental aspects of Robert Sobukwe's make-up: his humanity. It was his humanity which was the main factor in deciding how he lived his life. His humanity: his belief in people, his love for people, transcending all barriers of colour, class, age and even differences in political outlook.

How did this intense humanity come to be within him? Present here today to remember and to honour Bob — which is how I addressed him; it does not matter that to others he was Mangi, or Robert or Prof — can we find some explanation of the mystery of life that enables someone like Robert Sobukwe to soar to the heights as he did?

He was born here on December 5, 1924, the youngest of six boys and a girl. Three of the boys died at early ages. Today the only survivor of the family is the eldest child, Ernest — who, as we know, is a distinguished person in his own right: he rose to become a bishop in the Anglican Church.

On Bob's father's side the family originally came from what is now Lesotho but were in Graaff Reinet by early this century. It was here that his father, Hubert, met and married Angelina, who had been born in the town. Hubert worked as a labourer for the municipality, keeping furrows open for the town's water supply; later he worked in a store sorting wood; he was also a woodcutter, and the children had the job of helping him chop up wood for sale.

At first the family had a two-roomed store house in what is now called the Old Location. This was replaced by a four-roomed brick house. But while the site of the Sobukwe house is known, the actual house has since been replaced by a newer building.

It was a simple, humble home. Yet there was enough food to eat, and there was new clothing at least at Christmas.

Religion was a strong theme in the home and the family was staunchly Methodist. This is one of the main strands to be discerned in Robert Sobukwe's upbringing. Not only was there regular attendance at church on Sundays but the chil-



dren had to be able afterwards to recall the text of the minister's sermon. Any child who had not been paying attention in church and who could not remember the text was open to a hiding. As Ernest puts it, Hubert was "a loving, but stern father". Hubert was a leader in the local church, and was a highly respected member of the community — so much so that the street in which he lived was named Sobukwe Street, and is still so known today.

A second main strand in Bob's upbringing was education. Angelina had never attended school, but Hubert had gone as far as Standard Five. He had wanted to continue but was not allowed to do so. His mother was dead and a sister who was looking after him refused to let him go on with his studies: she was afraid that if he became educated he would ignore the family.

Hubert therefore took a vow: should he ever have children he would educate them all.

He kept his vow, and in so doing gave a priceless, life-long gift to Robert Sobukwe and the others: the love of learning. There was strictness again, however. The law of the house was that Bob, the same as the other children, had to do his homework before being allowed to go and play outside. Interestingly, all three of the brothers went into teaching, with Ernest and Bob only later turning to other fields which then dominated their respective lives — Ernest to the church and Bob to politics.

Linked with the stress on education was another main strand: the presence of books in the house. They were not fancy books; in fact they were books that other people no longer wanted; but they were books and they took the young Sobukwe into worlds beyond the location and the sleepy town. Hubert brought home books which the town library threw away; Angelina brought books given to her by the children of the family in the town far whom she worked.

The early years were spent here in Graaff Reinet, at the Methodist mission school in the location. It went only as far as Standard 4, so Bob had to continue — Standards 5 and 6 — at the Anglican school in the town. Then it was on to Healdtown, near Fort Beaufort, run by the Methodist Church and famous for its role in education, where he did what was called the "Native Primary Lower" — which was training as a primary school teacher. By now Bob was already recognised for his brilliance as a student, for his command of languages and for his reading: he walked around with a book in his hand and was getting through two or three a week.

But there was no interest in politics. For this youngster sport was the great passion after his studies. So much so that he became the Eastern Province tennis singles champion in the black league and also played a good game of rugby as full-back.

Then he fell ill with TB and was hospitalised. Only after recovering he was able to return to Healdtown where in 1946 he finally wrote his matriculation — and obtained a first-class pass.

Even then, however, at the age of 22 there was no interest in the wider issues of South Africa. Dennis Silisa, who has played such a role in organising today's ceremony, was by then a close friend. He remembers meeting Bob after a long space of time and trying to talk to him about the political scene: African nationalism was beginning to make itself felt. But Bob wanted none of it. He insisted on turning the conversation to sports. Dennis finally gave up in disgust and went off.

Starting from 1947, however, a different person began to emerge. In that year Bob began his studies at what was then the Fort Hare University College. He responded enthusiastically to the stimulation of new minds and new ideas. It was almost as if he was coming out of a deep sleep for, suddenly, under the particular impact of studying "Native Law and Administration" as one of his subjects, aided by the general growth in political consciousness caused by the coming to power in 1948 of the Afrikaner Nationalists, he began to perceive life around him in an entirely different way. For the first time he became acutely conscious of black disabilities and began to turn his energies to the search for freedom.

His academic excellence, his keen and original mind, his command of language, his ability to marshal and weigh up arguments, ensured that he rapidly emerged as a leader recognised by staff and students alike. In his second year he was elected to the Students' Representative Council, and the next year became president of it.

In the area of ideas he soon came to be a strong proponent of African nationalism. At the same time he was engaged in vigorous argument with those who dismissed African nationalism as a propelling force and who spoke instead of the power of non-collaboration. Yet even while he argued against this notion we can see, with hindsight, that he was in fact coming round to view it in a different light. From our perspective of today we can see that the political views which he was later to hold, and which took him to his destiny, were developing at Fort Hare.

It was at this time too that he became involved in the African National Congress Youth League, and he thus took part in the internal discussions that went on which led to the adoption of the Programme of Action at the 1949 ANC national conference. Again as we know, the spirit of that programme became a crucial element in his thinking.

His Bachelor of Arts completed, Bob found a job teaching at a high school in Standerion. It is worth noting at this stage that this meant he had turned away from the roads which others had wanted him to follow. Firstly, his family had looked to him to enter the ministry. Secondly, people at Healdtown had expected that their brilliant pupil would return there as a teacher. But this was by now a different Robert Sobukwe. The fire was now coursing through his veins. His earlier missionary supporters were alarmed by his behaviour at Fort Hare in asking a visiting white missionary speaker if he carried a pass; there was consternation at his tough talk in giving one of the speeches at the Completers' Social at Fort Hare. So Healdtown told Bob that there would not be a job for him there. It was a final parting of the ways in more senses than one.

Another vital strand must now be woven into the story of Bob's life. For it was in 1949 that he and Veronica Zodia first met. Appropriately enough, it was at a meeting which he was addressing. The courtship went on and, finally, in May, 1954, they married. At this stage, Bob had been offered a position at the University of the Witwatersrand and so thereafter they set up home in Soweto.

Now followed a tranquil period. The creation of a home, the birth of Dini, Miliswa, Dedani and Dalindyebo, the status of holding an academic post — even though Wits termed him merely a "language assistant": he was a marvellous teacher, it can be noted, his students revered him. All of this offered him the chance of being an elitist, sinking into a bed of material rewards.

But it could not be so for Robert Sobukwe. At Standerton he had not only kept up his ANC connections but his thinking was developing fast. By the time he arrived in Soweto he was critical of the ANC and became the intellectual force behind the Africanist group inside the ANC.

What followed is well known history. The breakaway from the ANC in 1958, and the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress in April 1959 . . . The launching of the anti-pass campaign on March 1960 . . . The shootings at Sharpeville and Langa . . . The prosecution, for "incitement", of Robert Sobukwe and his chief followers . . . And, as his three years in jail were about to end, the rushing through Parliament of a special law, the "Sobukwe clause", to give the Government the power to keep him in prison.

And, as we know, they did just that. For six years he was kept on Robben Island without any further trial. And then they consigned him to Kimberley under tight restrictions and banning.

How frightened they were of him!

While on Robben Island he completed a Bachelor of Economics degree by correspondence with the University of London. In Kimberley he completed his attorney's articles and set up his own practice. Need it even be said that, even in the short time that he practised, he was outstanding and that people flocked to him?

And then, when he fell ill, he was subject to merciless hounding and bullying. Getting permission for him to travel to Johannesburg for a medical examination was a major effort. We can only wonder whether he might have lived had the medical diagnosis been made earlier and treatment started earlier . . . had he not been confined to Kimberley, if he had been free to seek the best possible medical advice earlier, if there had not been such official obstacles placed in the way of him getting to top-class doctors.

How frightened they were of him!

And let's be blunt about it, they were right to be frightened. For here was a man with a vision of a different South Africa, and it was backed by an intellect, and integrity and the driving force of an emotional commitment, all of which combined to invest Robert Sobukwe with a great power. They were right to be frightened because Bob Sobukwe was a unique threat to their arrogant racism and the maintenance of their narrow privilege.

In this context there is another strand of his life which needs to be mentioned here. It is a part of him which many people, both black and white, did not fully understand while he was alive and even less so when he died. As I mentioned earlier, Bob's family came from Lesotho on the one hand. On his maternal side, his mother was a Pondo. He married Zodwa, who is supposed to be a Zulu. Although his home language was Xhosa, he went on to teach Zulu. No doubt all of this horrifies the racial purists in the government, but it says a lot about the nonsense of trying to keep up tribal divisions — and, of course, about Bob's attitude.

It goes even further, however. Because in the days that Bob grew up here in the Graaff Reinet location, black people and coloured people lived side by side. It was simply part of his life to have it so. When he went to Heidelberg there were whites who made their own financial sacrifices to help him; with his fees, his books and even with the medicines he needed after recovering from TB. They went on helping him at Fort Hre, adding to the bursaries he obtained. However much of Bob's path later diverged from the white missionaries, he never ceased to acknowledge what they had done for him.

All of these experiences and factors came together to shape the humanity in him. He rejected racism, from whichever group it might originate. He was an African nationalist. But he was not anti-anybody, whether coloured, Indian or white. Instead he had a warm interest in people. It was seen in his gentleness and his courtesy, in his concern and compassion for others.

It meant that people were easily drawn to him. He made it easy for us to love him.

And there was his courage. And with it the inspiration he gave. He did not ask anyone to do what he himself would not do. In 1960 he went first. He accepted the price he had to pay without a word of complaint.

Each one of us mourns Bob in our own way. His wife and children have their special grief. His friends remember their companionship of school, university and political times.

I mourn my friend and my brother.

South Africa, and Africa, mourn a son who could have brought about mighty change in our country, for the good of all our people. We can only pray that the spirit of Robert Mangiso Sobukwe will still serve to guide us. □



pictures by Benjamin Pogrand

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