

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT MAN ALEBU, S. WARDEN OF ROBBER ISLAND, CAPE TOWN,
JA TRAD 16, 17 AND 18, 1968.

Occupies two-roomed bungalow: uses one room as bedroom and for study purposes and the other room as a kitchen. Has hot and cold running water and a shower in nearby ablution block.

Bedroom contains wardrobe, bed with coil mattress, table and wooden chair, bookcase, floor mat. Sheets and bedding provided - enough blankets also for winter. Rooms have electricity points.

The bungalow is situated inside an enclosure of about 150 by 170 feet, enclosed by a barbed-wire fence. He can move freely inside the enclosure 24 hours a day.

The bungalow is clean and freshly painted.

When he was taken to Robben Island in May last year, he was housed in a building formerly occupied by Coloured trainee warders. He did not have very much space in which to move around and was locked inside his bungalow at night (prison officials explained to me that this was due to shortage of staff as they did not have enough guards). In August, he was moved to his present quarters which he says are very much better. His general conditions have also improved since then, as a Head Warden has been put in charge of him. This man is a kindly sort and is doing his best for Sobukwe. For example, he tries to overcome the monotony of Sobukwe's meals by seeing to it that from time to time his lunches are provided by the White Warders' mess.

~~XXXXXXXX~~ In May last year, the order confining Sobukwe to Robben Island and listing the conditions of imprisonment was served on him. A fresh one was served in August when he moved to new quarters. The order, signed by the Minister of Justice, specifies that he must get special type of food of better quality; not supervised in regard to the times of meals and going to sleep; in addition to books and magazines allowed in terms of prison regulations he is also entitled to receive South African newspapers; he has the right to listen to S.A.B.C. broadcasts; at any time, he can apply to the Minister for further concessions or changes.

/more.....

is allowed to receive and to write two letters a week "but there is a delay of several weeks in getting them to me," he told me.

He has had few visitors: the Roman Catholic priest who serves the Island has seen him once, and an African Methodist minister came once. His wife or one of his children saw him in December. Dr. Hoffman of the International Red Cross, saw him recently. ~~His brother, a minister, saw him this month.~~ I know of at least two people who have been refused entry: Mrs. Eulalie Stott, Black Sash and Cape Town City Councilor, and Professor Wellington, formerly Professor of Geography, Witwatersrand University. I think Mrs. Susman was also refused.

Otherwise, Sobelwe is on his own. He has no contact at all with the other prisoners and sees them only from a distance. The only people he speaks to are the warders, most of whom are Afrikaans speaking. One warder is on guard outside his enclosure during the day, and two from 4 p.m. onwards.

He wears his own clothing and has all that he needs. He washes and dries his own clothing and sends trousers etc., for dry-cleaning to Cape Town.

He has a radio. He provided the money for it himself and the authorities bought it. They supplied a ~~mixer~~ medium wave set which only picks up local stations. ~~It~~ It does not even pick up L.M. When I saw him, he was always neatly dressed: either in ~~trousers~~ trousers and a shirt or in a suit.

He started a garden in August with seeds provided by the Defence and Aid Fund in Cape Town. He grew cabbages, tomatoes, beans and flowers. He worked in the garden from 5.30 a.m. until about 9.30 a.m. and again for a couple of hours from 4 p.m. because of a water shortage on the Island, all non-essential use of water has been stopped and he no longer can look after his garden. He is looking forward to the winter rains to start again.

He now spends his day reading and studying. He is doing a Bachelor of Economics degree through the University of London. The subjects are: Economics, Economic History, British Government, Social Philosophy, Public International Law.

He goes to bed at about 11 p.m. There is no lights out restriction on him.

/more.....

asked him about the YAC statements overseas that he was being starved and beaten. He said: "I came here as a convict on April 23 last - during that time treatment and food I received was that of a convict. But I was kept in the barracks where these fellows (the party of journalists and P.M.s came to see me. During those first ten days I existed on porridge, bread and coffee - and I didn't eat much of the porridge and coffee because they were badly made. So that anyone would have thought I was not getting food."

When he changed over to my present life; right up to August 1960 he had porridge, milk and coffee for breakfast; porridge, meat (every day) and some vegetables and black coffee for lunch; three slices of bread, sugar, coffee and milk for supper. I immediately complained about the porridge for lunch and he'd not touch it any more. When I was transferred in August, he said he was given for lunch instead of porridge. In September, I wrote to the warden (in charge of the prison) and asked him to leave out porridge in the kitchen."

He told me that when he first went to jail in 1960, he weighed about 17 1/2 lbs. When he came to Robben Island, he weighed about 150 lbs. He now weighs about 162 lbs.

He sees a doctor (who visits the Island daily) whenever he wants to. He said his health was "satisfactory" except for pains in the joints of his left shoulder and in the lower back which he attributes to his long walking. (N.B. The island is also known to be a very damp spot.)

"I think my mental faculties are impaired - although (with a laugh) it is difficult for me to judge of course. But there is the strain of separation from my family, you will understand."

"Although, as I have said, most of the officials on the Island go out of their way to make my stay bearable, the fact does remain that one is imprisoned and the relations with them can never be completely friendly."

He said he intended applying for an exit permit to leave the country. He has told his wife to see lawyers to prepare the application. "It's for the sake of my wife and children. I want to supervise the upbringing of my children. Also, I want to be able to use whatever talents I have - to put my life to constructive purpose." (He also prepared an amplification of his reasons and gave it to me in written form the next day. This follows on the next page).

/more.....

"I have advised that my wife should, through a lawyer, reply to the court as follows, for the following reasons:

"I and my family, my wife and children have been kept at Robben Island for over three years now. And I do not expect to be released until that day, "this side of eternity", when the Minister of Justice will deem it fit to release me.

"Secondly, the children, when they were down here, took our torture very badly. And for their sake, I think I should take steps to ensure that we shall be united soon and that I can supervise their upbringing.

"Thirdly, I cannot pretend that I relish the idea of being rehabilitated on Robben Island. I want to use whatever talent I have usefully and creatively for the benefit and advancement of mankind.

He also told me "I have no complaints about the treatment here - out there is the prison atmosphere. I finished three years in jail for whatever I had done. I served my sentence. Straight from there (Pretoria (col.) I was moved to prison precincts, subject to prison regulations with the few exceptions the Minister has made. The consideration that the officials are showing me is not anything I can claim as of right. There are prison guards where I am living 24 hours a day, and whatever reason is given for their presence, the point is that they are there.

But, of course, seeing the other prisoners around-whether I see them from a distance or not - does affect me. I know I am better off than they are. For example, I can buy extra foods and toilet articles, up to R10 a month, and whatever is left over in the way of food etc., I just have to throw away - I can't give it to anybody. And yet I know that these prisoners would be extremely happy to have these things. It affects me because I keep on comparing my condition with theirs.

I am allowed newspapers and a certain number of letters. But as a result, I am in contact with the world while at the same time, detached from it. This leaves me unsettled and frustrated."

I asked his views on current events. He said:

"Looking at the international situation, I feel that there is a rapprochement being made. I do not think that the Soviet Union will adopt any measures that will disturb their relations with the United States in particular. I think the stage of development Communism has reached is such that they want to enjoy the fruits of their labour and the young generation certainly is not prepared to be in a state of perpetual antagonism towards the rest.

On the Continent of Africa, we are passing through a stage of readjustment. I am extremely certain that, first of all, Africa will overcome the economic difficulties which exist now. After all, we are inclined to make unfair comparisons because South Africa has been independent for 50 years and only now is the industrial momentum beginning to catch the eye. Except for one or two ~~xxxx~~ cases not one African state has gone backwards economically since the colonial governments left. Even the Congo chaos which we are so fond of talking is not of the Africans making." Added that he thought that ~~the~~ ~~xxxx~~ had been left alone, he could have run the Congo successfully as he was the most popularly accepted leader. He thought the same about ~~xxxx~~.

/more.....

On South Africa: "What I see is a determined effort to stir up the masses of colour in South Africa so that in fact the unity of the nation will be a multi-racial one. There are a number of Africanist intellectuals who are doing all this - but, at I think, a distance from the masses. I think that all these intellectuals are trying to do is to stir up the masses. To that end they are doing a very good job. I think that the Government is going to be able to resist the pressure of the masses. Therefore a stroke of the Goshawk. I think now if the Government is equated with criticism of the South African Government. I think I have come to appreciate the course of actions of the Africanists and organisations, both political and non-political, which have given rise to the situation. In fact, I think I could even express admiration for the Burger which is trying at any rate to present an intellectual case."

Can we see any prospects of change in South Africa? - "Certainly. The fact that those who are opposed to apartheid are taking up an uncompromising attitude does mean that the issues will be highlighted. Both the economic development of the country and the intellectual stirrings among the Africanist intellectuals in particular, will bring about an initial modification of attitudes. Once that is reached, it will be easier to reach a broader agreement. But the Government is quite aware of that, and that is why it is trying to prevent, not only contact across the colour line, but also the free circulation of ideas."

On Feyer: "I was behind bars in Pretoria Gaol when it happened, and when I was allowed contact with the world again, the immediate causes of it were over. So I do not know what gave rise to it. I was not involved in it in any way at all."

In his attitude to Whites: "I know I have been accused of being anti-White, not only by the Government, but also by others. But there is not one who can quote any statement of mine that bears that out. When I say 'Africa for the Africans', I have always made clear that by African I mean those of any colour, who accept Africa as their home. Colour does not mean anything to me."

/more.....

Q.E: Physically he seemed to me to be in reasonable shape. He looked better than when I last saw him in Pretoria Jail early last year. His skin, though, has a deadish appearance and his face has definitely aged in appearance. He seems to have lost several teeth at the side of his mouth. Generally, he was relatively alert but certainly not at the same level as before he went to jail. At times he struggled to find simple words to express himself and laughingly apologized for this. My visit and our discussion visibly stimulated him. He was animated throughout.

The wardens - a captain and a Head Warden - were extremely friendly towards him, calling him "Robert". He was as polite and friendly to them.

Ends...

PUBLISHER:

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

Location:- Johannesburg

©2010

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the Historical Papers website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

People using these records relating to the archives of Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are reminded that such records sometimes contain material which is uncorroborated, inaccurate, distorted or untrue. While these digital records are true facsimiles of paper documents and the information contained herein is obtained from sources believed to be accurate and reliable, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand has not independently verified their content. Consequently, the University is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the website or any related information on third party websites accessible from this website.

DOCUMENT DETAILS:

DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- A2618-Cb1

Document Title:- Interview with R Sobukwe; copy

Author:- B Pogrund

Document Date:- Jan 16-18 1964