

SOUTH AFRICA

A life fighting apartheid

A friend remembers the late Robert Sobukwe

Robert Mangaliso (meaning "It is wonderful") Sobukwe, the noted South African black leader, died Feb. 26, 1978. His tombstone was unveiled Aug. 15 in the small town of Graaff Reinet. Sobukwe spent his life fighting apartheid; he is buried in a segregated cemetery outside the town.

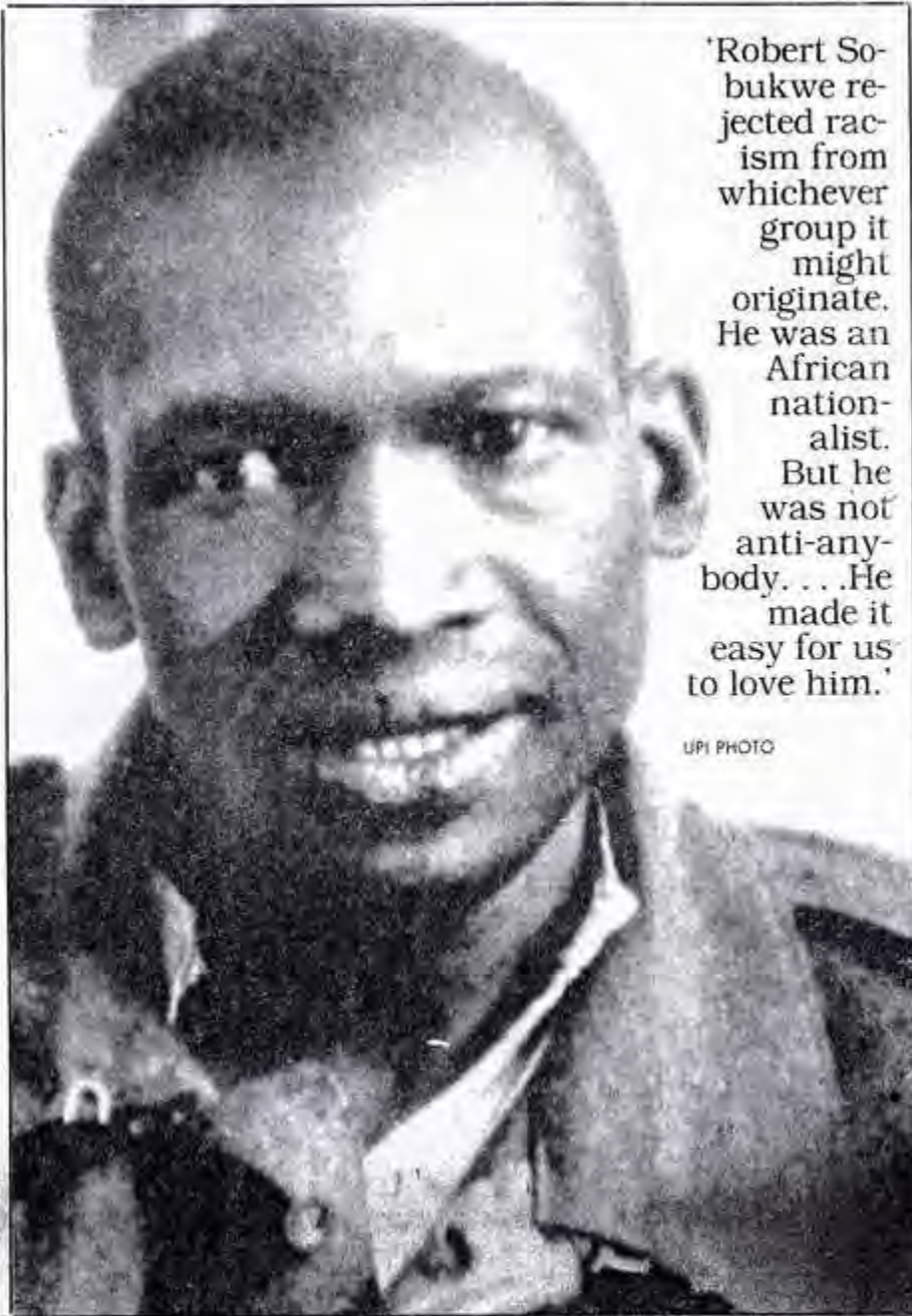
Benjamin Pogrund, who is *The Globe's* correspondent in South Africa, was a close friend of Sobukwe and was invited to speak at the unveiling. About 2000 people attended — virtually all black and mixed-race Coloreds, with a scattering of whites and Indians. The South African police kept watch on the proceedings but did not interfere.

By Benjamin Pogrund

GRAAFF REINET, South Africa — 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."

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UPI PHOTO

'Robert Sobukwe rejected racism from whichever group it might originate. He was an African nationalist. But he was not anti-anybody. . . . He made it easy for us to love him.'

Sobukwe

AFAPARTHEID

I looked at his face and thought, Here we go, a grimace and a grin, and a warty nose, and a nose that is neither the best of the world, nor the worst of it. He had a thin, straight nose, but the nostrils were so wide that they seemed to be breathing a life of their own.

"That Bob," I said, "is not a man who will be any use to me unless he is willing to help you on his own terms."

Yes, I said, "I am a man who will be no use to you unless you are willing to help me on my own terms."

Bob had a face that was neither the best of the world, nor the worst of it. He had a thin, straight nose, but the nostrils were so wide that they seemed to be breathing a life of their own.

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more regular attendance at church on Sundays, but the children had to be able to attend to avoid the fact of the matter. They would who had not been going to church and who would not conform to the rest was open to a finding.

A second man joined in Bob's upbringing was my mother, Angela. She had been a student at school, but Robert had gone to the Standard 5. He had wanted to continue but was not allowed to do so. Robert himself took a year 5 school as one of his children, he would educate them all.

It kept his mind, 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, like some of the other children, had to do his homework before being allowed to go and play outside.

In the early years were spent here in Graaff Retief, 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 Heidelberg, near Fort Beaufort, run by the Methodist Church and famous for its use in education, where he did what was called the "Sixth Primary Leader" which was training as a primary school teacher. By now, Bob was already recognized in his brilliance as a student for his command of languages and for his results.

But there was no interest in politics for this youngster, sport was the great passion after his studies. So much so that because the Eastern Province tennis (English) champions on the black team and he played a good game of rugby as a full back.

Then he fell ill with TB and was hospitalized. Only after recovering was he able to return to Heidelberg where, in 1946, he finally made 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.

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. He succeeded, under the particular tutelage of "Klingbein, Baines, and Amundson" as far as his subjects, aided by the general growth of political

consciousness caused by the coming to power in 1948 of the African National Congress. 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.

Championed African nationalism

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 discussed African nationalism as a propelling force and who spoke instead of the power of non-cooperation. 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 that he was later to hold, and that 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 (ANC) Youth League, and he thus took part in the internal discussions that went on that led to the adoption of the Program of Action at the 1949 ANC national conference.

His bachelor of arts completed, Bob found a job teaching at a high school in Stellenbosch. It is worth noting at this stage that this meant he had turned away from the road that others had wanted him to follow. Firstly, his family had looked to him to enter the ministry. Secondly, people at Heidelberg had expected that their brilliant pupil would continue 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 warned by his behavior in Fort Hare to 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 Heidelberg 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 aspect must now be woven into the story of Bob's life. For it was in 1949 that he and Veronica Zosha first met. Appropriately enough, it was at a meeting that 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 soon thereafter they set up home in Soweto.

Now followed a marriage period. The creation of a home, the birth of Bob, Mil-

lena, Dedos and Dorothea, the many problems of a budding new parent though Will worked him merely a "language assistant"; he was a nervous teacher, it can be stated his students revered him. All of this offered him the chance of being an artist, soaking into a bed of maternal rewards.

But it could not be so for Robert Sobukwe. At Stellenbosch 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 1959, and the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress in April 1960 - the launching of the anti-pass campaign on March 21, 1960 - The attack on Sharpeville and Langa - The prosecution, by "instigation" 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.

III. hounded and bullied

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

And then, when he fell ill, he was subjected to merciless flogging 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.

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 6-freedom South Africa, and it was backed by an intellect, an 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 that 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 on his father's side came from Lesotho. On his maternal side his mother was a Pedi. He married Zosha, who is supposed to be a Zulu. Although his home language was Xhosa, he went on to teach Zulu. So much all of this besides the racial politics in the government, but it says a lot about the nonsense of trying to keep up racial 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 Retief location, black people and colored 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 Hare, adding to the lawyers he obtained. However much Bob's path later diverged from the white-minority, he never ceased to acknowledge what they had done for him.

All of these experiences and injustices came together to shape the humanity in him. He rejected racism, from white-minority grasp it might originate, from any one individual. But he was not anti-white-body, whether colored, Indian or white. Instead, he had a warm interest in people. It was seen in his gentleness and his courtesy, in his concern and sympathy for others.

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

Another way his strength. 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 in life to pay without a word of complaint.

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

I mourn my friend and my brother.

South Africa, and Africa, mourn a man who could have brought about change in our country, by the good of all our people. We can only pray that the spirit of Robert Mangosuthu Sobukwe will still leave to guide us.

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