

Reality

10TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF ROBERT MANGALISO SOBUKWE

The Special Committee against Apartheid, United Nations, New York, February 26, 1988

The South African government passed a special law to keep Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe in prison. That's how much they feared him.

He had already at that time spent three years in jail for what was called "incitement": his offence was that he had launched mass action against the passes, those hated documents of control which all black men and women had to carry upon pain of arrest.

With his sentence coming to an end in 1963, the government took action to keep him locked up. The special law it passed was used only against him and thus was known as the "Sobukwe Clause". He was taken to Robben Island prison and kept there, effectively in solitary confinement, isolated and in contact only with officials and a handful of visitors. His food was brought by a prisoner and a guard; the prisoner was under orders not to say a word to him.

The government watched him carefully. They were looking for signs of change in him, of a lessening of his opposition to apartheid. They were anxious to know if it was safe to release him.

But he gave them nothing. He was unrelenting, and as determined as ever to give himself to bringing down the arrogance of white rule.

After he had been on the island for two years it so happened that I landed in trouble with the government. This was because of reports I wrote in my newspaper, the Rand Daily Mail, about maltreatment of black criminal prisoners and white political prisoners. You have in that mention a reminder, if any be needed, that apartheid means that there are not only separate prisons, or sections of prisons, for people of different colour, but even different grades of food and clothing.

The government set about prosecuting my informants and me. Information about what was happening was withheld from Sobukwe but he learned enough. I was no longer allowed to visit him, but he wrote to me, and the letter was let through by the authorities.

"I want to assure you that I am quite aware of the political implications of this case. And I do not wish history ever to record that for some opportunistic reason or other, I kept mum like Brer Rabbit, when I should have spoken, at the same time being quite voluble when I should have held my peace.

"If then, at any time in the future, at any stage of this case, you should like me to testify please don't fear that your calling me as a witness will jeopardise my position."

And in a stern warning to me against being too protective of him, he added: "We have become so anxious to shield and spare our friends that we are virtual 'collaborators'!"

In writing this he knew, as much as I did, that he was helping to doom himself to continued imprisonment. He was telling the government exactly what they were most afraid of: that imprisonment, even with the years stretching ahead and no end in sight, had not broken his resistance.

Nor did they stop there. During the next several years he repeatedly wrote to me, urging me to stand firm and not to yield the truth. Each time I received one of those letters I knew he was knocking another nail into his prison door.

This courage — and what a small word it is for actions with such far-reaching consequences — was the pattern of Robert Sobukwe's life. It is one of the many reasons for our being here today to remember him.

He was born on December 5, 1924 in Graaff Reinet which was then a sleepy Eastern Cape country town. It is not the same these days: the town — at least the segregated black part of it — has come alive and is now one of the centres of resistance to apartheid, and because of this its people suffer cruelly. But for the young Sobukwe, the son of Hubert and Angelina, a labourer and a domestic servant, it was a simple, spartan but happy boyhood in the rundown location — the black ghetto — outside the town.

From early on, his parents gave him the great gift of love of books and reading. They did not have money but they brought home books from their employers and the discards of the town's public library for whites.

His brilliance was evident from an early age. He was given a bursary to go as a boarding pupil to Healdtown, famed for the quality of its pupils, even under the poor conditions of education for blacks. Sobukwe was the best: his missionary teachers glowed over him and said he was the cleverest boy the school had ever had. They wanted him to come back to teach at Healdtown.

But Sobukwe was transformed during the next stage of his education, at the Fort Hare University College, also a segregated institution. His studies opened his eyes and his mind to the system responsible for black oppression. He plunged into the ferment of ideas at Fort Hare during the late 1940s, and rapidly took a leading role. He joined the Youth League of the African National Congress. He found and embraced African nationalism and pan-Africanism; he accepted the concept of non-collaboration with the oppressor.

As a student he had to make his first brave choice in life: he spoke out against racial segregation and was faced with the loss of his scholarship. But he refused to back down. He

retained the scholarship but the offer of a secure job at Healdtown disappeared. His mentors were kind people; but they were simply beyond understanding the change which had come about in their star pupil, and his mental leap into the black struggle.

One immediate result was that he had difficulty in finding work. Then he was given a teaching post in the small town of Standerton: it was a long distance away, but it was only 100 miles from Johannesburg, the hub of the country. Despite this proximity, black politics were hardly known in Standerton and, anyway, as a teacher Sobukwe was deterred from any involvement. But, once more, he did what he believed should be done: he organised a protest meeting against apartheid, invited ANC leaders from Johannesburg to attend, and also spoke at it. The government promptly moved to fire him from teaching; he was saved because of the devotion of the community: they argued for him and succeeded.

Then he accepted an invitation to join the staff at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, to teach Zulu, and he moved to Soweto. He was a rare creature, a black man teaching at a university meant for whites. He had greater security and a better income than he could have thought possible only a short time before. He was married to Veronica Zodwa Mathe, whom he had met while she was training as a nurse — indeed while she was taking part in a nurse's strike — and they had four children. He completed a second degree at the university, writing about Xhosa riddles. In his achievements and living, he was one of a tiny elite among blacks.

But he did not forget his beliefs. He would not ignore the suffering of people under an apartheid growing more racist and more rigorous with each year that the Afrikaner Nationalists were in power. He would not live safely and comfortably amidst deprivation and degradation.



So he picked up where he had left off as a student leader: he gave freshness to the concepts of black self-respect and uncompromising struggle, and to the goal of a United States of Africa. He articulated and developed them and became the driving force in the Africanist movement inside the African National Congress. The internal disagreements became unbridgeable and he led a breakaway from the ANC in 1958, and the next year was unanimously elected president when the Pan-African Congress was founded.

He spoke, at that first conference, of the South Africa he wanted: "We aim, politically, at government of the Africans by the Africans for the Africans, with everybody who owes his only loyalty to Africa and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as an African. We guarantee no minority rights, because we think in terms of individuals, not groups."

Less than a year later, on March 21, 1960, he launched what he termed "decisive action" against the pass laws: Only a few weeks before, he had again come to a crossroads in his life: he was offered an even better position at another "white" university, with the promise of greater income and status. He agonised over it; he was tempted; then he turned it down.

Instead, he went ahead and called on black people to leave their passes at home and offer themselves for arrest at the nearest police station. He did not merely urge it. He went first. He said he would not ask people to do anything he would not do himself. This, to him, was the responsibility of a leader. Shortly after sunrise that Monday morning he was at the Orlando police station in Soweto. He told the police he did not have his pass with him and he wanted to be arrested. He publicly declared: "No bail, no detence, no fine."

The police killed 69 people at Sharpeville that day. The shooting was not only shocking in itself, it swelled the tide of feeling unleashed by the anti-pass campaign. As protest surged up and down the country, and apartheid sprang to the world's attention on a scale which had never happened before, the government held on to power: it banned the Pan-Africanist Congress and the African National Congress, declared a state of emergency and detained many thousands of people.

"We are creating history," was Sobukwe's message to his followers. He was right. March 21, 1960 transformed South Africa. It was a turning point in relations between black and white and in the nature of the striving for rights, with results that are still being worked out today. It showed that there could be no further hope of persuading whites, merely through reason, logical argument and humanitarian appeal, to end oppression. It brought black struggle to a new peak of intensity and commitment.

The government's recognition of Sobukwe's potency led to his prosecution and jailing under the "incitement" laws. And, as I have said, when that sentence was nearing an end, a special law was rushed through to keep him imprisoned. There was no trial. The Robben Island detention was renewed year after year. He never knew from one year to the next how long it would continue. It went on for six years.

I have already given you an indication of his dauntless spirit during this time. He maintained it in the face of the treatment of which he was victim: as a result of indefinite detention and virtual solitary confinement, he became so unused to speaking to people that there were times he had to



struggle for words when he did have an occasional visitor. He was also subject to everyday cruelty, whether long delays in giving him letters, or withholding a food parcel without bothering to let him know about it. Books were repeatedly held up or seized.

He was aware of the effects on him. He was studying by correspondence and he wrote to me: "I am still finding it difficult to concentrate, and I expect the trouble to get worse, not better. It is unavoidable in the circumstances, I think." There was no complaining, only that matter of fact acceptance. He completed his third university degree, and the strength of his intellect and his passion for learning were always taking him into new fields of inquiry.

Above all, his sense of humour, quietly mocking his jailers, never waned. I remember that he discovered, months after the event, that Lincoln University in the United States had awarded him an honorary degree: surely the South African government would not object to this, he wrote to me; after all, Lincoln was a university with many black students and he was black. I doubt that the official censors realised that he was poking fun at their racism, otherwise they might not have let his letter through.

Nor was the suffering only his. Veronica was steadfast and strong but it was hard for her. And it has been hard for the children deprived of their father.

When Sobukwe was finally released from Robben Island, in 1969, the Afrikaner Nationalists were still frightened of what he could do to them. So they kept him in a different form of captivity. He was banished to the town of Kimberley — where he had never before set foot — and his personal liberties were severely restricted. He could not move outside the boundaries of the small town; he was not allowed to be with more than one person at a time; he was not allowed to enter any school or factory; he was not allowed to write anything for publication; he could not be quoted in any way; he had to live in a designated house in the black ghetto of Galeshewe; and he was ordered to remain there, under house-arrest, from sunset to sunrise every day. No visitors were allowed without permission.

Again his indomitable spirit triumphed. He would not allow them to crush him. He studied law and qualified as an attorney. People in trouble, and there was no lack of them in the area, flocked to him.

But he fell ill. The standard of medical diagnosis in Kimberley was deficient; we had to apply — beg — the government for permission for him to travel to Johannesburg for a proper medical check. First the authorities refused; then they agreed; but there were delays. By the time the cancer in his lungs was finally detected, it was too late.

He died ten years ago today. That was a mere eight months after he first told me that he was not feeling well.

I blame the South African government for his death. In particular I blame J. T. Kruger, who was Minister of Justice at the time, and the faceless Security policeman at his side. It was Kruger, too, who perpetrated that notorious "It leaves me cold" remark about the death of Steve Biko. But heartless as Kruger was, he was of course only the instrument of his government.

During the nearly 20 years that I knew Robert Sobukwe there was a phrase from Chaucer which always rang through my mind about him: a gentle, perfect knight.

He was a modest man. He was sensitive and concerned about the needs and hurts of others. He was incapable of meanness. He had matchless courtesy, speaking with the same grave politeness to high and low, young and old, friend and enemy. And so often there was that warm smile lighting up his face, that big grin, and that deep chuckle of amusement.

Our friendship not only endured but grew immeasurably closer over the years. That this was so reflected a failure of apartheid; we drew together despite the racialist poison spread by the Afrikaner Nationalists; we surmounted the barriers of colour created by the rulers. They could not stop us being friends and brothers. It must have baffled them.

When he was in Kimberley, I visited him frequently. An everyday experience offers a glimpse into his life then. . . .

There wasn't a single place in that town where apartheid allowed us to sit down and have a meal together. We used to buy a carton of milk and sandwiches at a store and find what shade we could from the broiling sun under a scraggy thorn tree; the Security Police, almost always following us, kept watch from a short distance away.

Then a tearoom was opened at the De Beers diamond mine in the town. It enforced apartheid, and we were barred from the "whites" section. But we were allowed into the "non-whites" section: somehow, through being with Sobukwe, I acquired some sort of honorary black status. We laughed at it — but derived enormous enjoyment from the simple fact of being able to sit at a table and share a pot of tea. And then we made friends with someone who let us meet at his home, so that we could actually spend a day together sitting in armchairs in a comfortable living-room. We thought the revolution was coming!

At sunset, of course, we had to part company, with the Security Police circling around to make sure he was home on time.

I suppose the South African government and its supporters will say that it is different now, and what they call their reform has made it possible for people of different colours to drink tea together and even to stay in the same hotels. That is true, and what moves there have been away from raw, unfettered discrimination should be acknowledged and applauded. At least the Afrikaners have been made to feel a little bit embarrassed and uneasy and they are changing some of their debased ways. But it's a giant jump from this to believing for a moment that fundamental change is taking place, or that they are trying to do anything except secure white rule and privilege in different guise.

The tragic proof of that is evident in South Africa at present. Information coming out is that the government is governing by terror. It is the only way it can keep control. It is using its police and its army, and it is being aided by blacks who volunteer their services out of different motives, none of them pleasant. Little of what is happening is being publicly told, either inside or outside the country. The harsh laws against giving information about security activities, with imprisonment of up to ten years for transgressors; keeping reporters and photographers and cameramen away from disturbances; and a system whereby what little is made known is determined by the police, have been spectacularly successful in suppressing information.

This will not last forever. Black determination will ultimately burst through, and news of it will emerge. Many have already helped, and suffered, to make sure that undemocratic minority rule is ended; many are still helping and suffering to try to ensure that it happens as swiftly as possible.

All South Africans are not always in agreement about how best to reach for the future. Despite that, a broad mainstream of resistance is evident over the years: Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Patrick Duncan, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, Zeph Mothopeng, Patrick Lekota, are a few of the names from the past and the present which spring readily to mind. There are many others — and again, in total contradiction of apartheid, they are people of different colours, joined together in being of Africa and committed to Africa.

My being here today and speaking to you is, I believe and hope, another small expression of that outlook.

"There is only one race to which we all belong, and that is the human race," said Sobukwe.

It is South Africa's terrible loss that Robert Sobukwe is no longer with us to take part in the struggle for liberty, to attack racism and divisive tribalism, to lead through personal example, and to inspire through his gift for drawing people to him.

Yet central to what I have been saying is the legacy he has left us. It is a lesson beyond price for the world as much as for South Africa: he was held captive by an authoritarian government for the last 18 years of his life; but he never lost his freedom. □

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