

## Sobukwe

Dear Editors,

If only for the sake of historical record I have to deal with Anne Harries' review of my book, *How Can Man Die Better ... Sobukwe and Apartheid*, in your issue of January/February 1991.

First, she attributes to Marq de Villiers a description of his aunt, the late Nell Marquard, being in Cape Town docks to greet Sobukwe when he was released from Robben Island in 1969: 'He came down the gangplank, stopped to look at her, then bent down in a great hug and held her to him. They held that hug for five minutes or more, then they went together to take tea at Kirstenbosch Gardens on the slopes of the gentle mountain, then he left, to banishment and death. They never saw each other again'.

I knew and respected Mrs Marquard. But I mean no disrespect to her memory when I say that this story, nice as it (and if, of course, Anne Harries has quoted it correctly — a question of possible doubt in view of what I shall be going on to say), is incorrect. It is romanticised fiction.

Indeed anyone who knows anything about conditions in South Africa at that time will realise that the story is inherently improbable. The Security Police were not the sort of people to allow the country's No 1 political prisoner to walk down the ferryboat's gangplank into the arms of a waiting woman, embrace her for five minutes and go and have a cosy tea at Kirstenbosch.

Instead, as my book recounts, Sobukwe was removed from the island in conditions of secrecy, and was driven by car to Kimberley by Security policemen, with stops only for petrol and food, to be dumped alone in a near-empty large house. There was no one, except Security policemen and jail warders, to greet him in the docks; there were no courtesies for him during the 650-mile car journey. Even Mrs Sobukwe only knew of his release after he had reached Kimberley.

If Marq de Villiers has been correctly quoted then I think he has confused Sobukwe coming off the island with his visits to Cape Town five and a half years later for treatment for the cancer from which he was dying. It would have been at that time that he and Nell Marquard embraced and went for tea.

Second, I am perturbed at the way in which Ms Harries has handled this matter. For, faced by Mr de Villiers' version as against mine, she promptly decides that I am wrong, accuses me of a 'notable omission' and heavily continues: 'which suggests that there are many more such omissions throughout the book'.

That's a big jump she makes, from a foundation based on nothing, into thin air.

What omissions?

Third, Ms Harries uses the same technique of making deductions from nothing in referring to the reasons for the government releasing Sobukwe from Robben Island. Despite my description of events and the psychological context in which I placed them, she persists in saying: '... but the whole affair is still shrouded in mystery. Probably only Veronica (Sobukwe) knows the true story'.

What 'mystery'? What 'true story'?

Both Mrs Sobukwe and I know what happened and the basic facts are set out in the book.

Similarly with Ms Harries' reference to the money which sustained Sobukwe in jail. 'There is no mention of Gordon Winter's claim that the CIA subsidised the Sobukwe family throughout Robert's exile on the island,' she complains about my book.

I am not sure what she is trying to convey by this. Is it some kind of sly innuendo that I have concealed sources of income? If she believes that she needs to look at my book again: everyone who helped is acknowledged. There was no other money that I was aware of. In any event, if Ms Harries' knowledge of South Africa was not so limited she would realise the need to treat claims by Gordon Winter with caution, and to be even more mistrustful of his Security Police sources who — certainly at that time — were crude and ignorant about black politics.

Fourth, her review has a series of elementary factual errors. To take but two examples: even though she makes such play of the Marq de Villiers story she manages to state the wrong month — and the wrong year — of Sobukwe's release from the island. Then she ascribes my 'weakness for the "skirt world"' as causing the break up of my marriage: she is wrong again, because as the book makes clear, Sobukwe's 'skirt world' reference came some years after my marriage had ended, when I was living on my own.

Not only do I find Ms Harries deficient in knowledge and adherence to facts, but most seriously of all perhaps is her reference to Sobukwe's detention on Robben Island as 'not exactly in jail, but in exile'. She keeps using the word, 'exile'.

Of course, Sobukwe had creature comforts not normal to prisoners in South Africa. But he was kept in conditions of such isolation, and without knowing for how long it would last, that the corrosive effects on him were as I describe in the book. If Ms Harries can call that 'exile' then, again, she is blind to what life was like, whether for Sobukwe or others who have endured so much in that country.

I would have been glad to have my book subjected to vigorous debate, with an intelligent assessment of Robert Sobukwe and my view of him. However, this sort of shoddy, sneering stuff is meaningless and distasteful. Third-rate reviewing is not unusual. But the purpose of your magazine is presumably to deal seriously with books about Southern Africa. I am driven to ask whether you serve any purpose when you employ people of the calibre of Ms Harries.

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Ann Harries replies:

I must apologise to Mr Pogrud for causing him such distress. It was totally unfair of me to prefer Marq de Villiers' version of Sobukwe's return from the Island, I agree, and getting the date wrong by a few months was unforgivable, even though Mr Pogrud omitted to include it in his own very pithy account of this traumatic event.

As far as the issue of Mr Pogrud's relations with the 'skirt world' is concerned, I'll have to take his word for it that none of his affairs was extra-marital, having neither the time nor, it has to be said, the inclination, to check their pre-

cise dates, and as for Gordon Winters — I had assumed (rather optimistically) that my parenthesis had put that gentleman in his historical place.

However, interesting as are all the points Mr Pogrud raises, I hope they do not deflect the reader's attention from the purpose of both his book and my review. It is the calm voice of Sobukwe that we want to hear in these confused times, and in the lamentable absence of any full-scale publication of Sobukwe's own writing, I would hope that Mr Pogrud's biography, for all its shortcomings, will eventually gain a wide readership.

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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