

# A Very Gentle Man

By Anthony Lewis 78

WASHINGTON, March 1—A few times in his life a newspaper reporter meets a political figure and senses authentic greatness: a magnetic external presence combined with a sense of inner serenity. That happened to me on June 7, 1975, in the South African mining town of Kimberley, to meet Robert Sobukwe.

He was despised and rejected by those who hold power in his country. He lived in enforced obscurity, unable to travel, his countrymen forbidden to read his words. But there was a power in him that shone through all the petty cruelties of official suppression. It was the power of belief in humanity, in nonviolent change toward justice, and those who oppressed him should pray that he will survive his death this week.

Robert Sobukwe suffered indignities that would destroy most of us. As leader of the Pan-Africanist Congress, he was sent to prison in 1960—and his organization banned—for protesting against the pass laws that bind the blacks of South Africa. When his three-year sentence ended, the Nationalist Government passed a law to keep him in detention without any charge or proof of a criminal offense.

For six years he was kept in a stockade on Robben Island—alone, without even the companionship of other prisoners, because he was not formally a prisoner. Then he was sent to Kimberley, a town he did not know, and banned; forbidden to meet more than one other person at a time, to leave home at night or to venture outside Kimberley without special permission.

He was invited to lecture at the University of Wisconsin in 1970 and got the necessary permit to leave South Africa, but the Ministry of Justice would not relax the banning order to let him go to the airport in Johannesburg. Even when he was dying, officials harried doctors and friends to keep to the rules.

But none of that showed in Robert Sobukwe. Meeting him, one saw a man uttering at peace with himself—and with his tormentors. He laughed a lot. And when he spoke of some ingenious twist of racial discrimination in South Africa, he shook his head as if in amazement at human foolishness and said: "Honestly . . ."

I said I thought the Afrikaners who rule South Africa still had a strong sense of having been treated unfairly by the English-speaking whites. "I agree with them," Mr. Sobukwe said. "I think there's a lot in that. But then why can't they understand how we feel when we suffer discrimination? Honestly . . ."

Of his detention on Robben Island, he said: "It gave me an opportunity to

read." He got a degree in economics from London University by correspondence in those years. In Kimberley, despite the restrictions, he trained as a lawyer and was admitted in practice. And he made a point of saying that the authorities had treated him with courtesy.

"When I ring the prosecutors about legal business," he said, "I say 'Sobukwe here' and they say 'Yes, Mencer.' The security chief here has been consistently polite, too. As human beings I think that man and I could be friends. I know he has his job. He knows I am a politician, with my views."

His view was that whites and blacks have to live together in South Africa. "A nonracial society," he said: "That remains my goal. I would make racism a crime, no matter from which side it came—like an American civil rights law."

But he saw, in 1975, that time was running out for his ideas, that anti-white feeling was growing among blacks. He noted with quiet irony that whites were shocked at expressions of black antagonism: "Until now it has been the white prerogative to hate." He predicted, correctly, that students would lead the way in expressing

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black feelings, and that they would be suppressed. The Government would discount the students' protests, he said, "but they are in fact the barometer of black opinion."

He had no illusion of quick change in South Africa. No easy revolutionary slogans came to his lips. He thought it would be a long, hard struggle to persuade the white minority that its own true interest lay in treating nonwhites as fellow human beings. In the end, he said, as whites felt the pressures of the world, they would find themselves needing "the loyalty of the blacks. That will be the crucial dilemma."

Robert Sobukwe made the same extraordinary impression on many Americans who came to see him in his isolation. Senator Dick Clark of Iowa, who saw him in December, 1976, said after his flight: "He was a very gentle man. More than any other person I met in South Africa he represented what I had read about: that people could still be rational in the demand for change, not bitter, I could hardly understand it—the lack of bitterness."

The tragedy of Robert Sobukwe's isolation and death is for the white people of South Africa more even than the black. By refusing to talk with him, those in power lost what may be their last best hope of rational accommodation to change, to humanity. Cry the beloved country.

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