

ROBERT SOBUKWE

I The book will be in two parts:

- (a) the first quarter to a third will comprise a biography: an outline of this is attached.
- (b) the bulk of the book will consist of letters written by Mr Sobukwe while on Robben Island Prison, some examples of which are attached.

The letters reveal the extraordinary, at times bizarre, circumstances of his detention without trial for a period of six years.

But overriding this is the picture of the man which emerges: a few sample letters cannot adequately convey this; the letters must be read in flowing sequence.

II Some of the letters from Mr Sobukwe, to me, and to another person, are in my possession at present. But letters for the period from 1963 to 1967, and those he wrote to his wife, are in storage in London. I would have to spend 4 to 6 weeks in London to edit them and will probably require secretarial assistance for this.

As can be seen, a fair amount of personal material occurs in the letters and it will have to be decided to what extent this should be edited out. Similarly with the texts of my letters to Mr Sobukwe which frequently created the basis on which he wrote.

III Photographs are available: a sample is attached. This
was taken on the morning of Monday, March 21, 1960 when
Mr Sobukwe was walking into imprisonment.

JOHANNESBURG

September 24, 1979

OUTLINE OF BIOGRAPHY

1) As the sky began to lighten on a late-summer day in South Africa, Robert Sobukwe set off from his home in Mofolo, Soweto, to walk to the nearest police station, four miles away. As he walked, other men joined him - giving and receiving a salute, right hand raised, the palm open, and a sonorous greeting, Izwe Lethu iAfrika (Return to us, Oh Africa). Early-rising workers looked at them curiously; some greeted them, others hurried to be away from them.

By dawn, Sobukwe and his followers reached Orlando police station. Only a handful of them. They went into the charge office and declared they had left their passes at home and were offering themselves for arrest. To their surprise, they were ordered to wait outside. They sat on the grass outside the corrugated iron police station.

It was Monday, March 21, 1960. For Sobukwe, it was the day that South Africa was to be transformed by what he had termed "positive action" against the pass laws. These laws were, and still are, the essential means used by white authority to control the black majority: they determine where blacks can live and work, and even what work they may do. Transgressors face arrest, prosecution and jailing. Hundreds of thousands of blacks are arrested each year under the laws.

Sobukwe had called on blacks to end the pass system by making the system imoperable through mass arrests, thus flooding the courts and the prisons. It was the first major

campaign of his organisation, the Pan-Africanist Congress, formed 18 months before in a breakaway from the African National Congress.

The day did transform South Africa. But not in the way intended by Sobukwe and the PAC. It was a day that proved to be a fulcrum event in South African political history: by the end of it, 69 people had been killed by police fire at Sharpeville, the segregated black township near Vereeniging; largescale disturbances and shooting had occurred at Langa near Cape Town, 1000 miles to the south.

These events set off a tide of black protest. Within ten days, both the PAC and the ANC were proscribed, the Government declared a State of Emergency and hundreds were detained.

Looking back, it can be seen that, until that day, there was always the possibility of a gradual working out of South Africa's racial problems. But the country became transformed: on the white side, a new wave of authoritarian control began; with it, the Afrikaner Nationalist government of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd became set on its policy of racial separate development, with the full consequences that are being experienced today. On the black side, the legal protest that had been possible was now ended; it led, 21 months later, to the first acts of organised sabotage; and as leaders went into exile, to the systematic building up of a worldwide campaign against apartheid. The consequences are also now being experienced.

Sobukwe, meanwhile, had been sentenced to imprisonment for three years for incitement. As his term neared an end, the

Government rushed a special law through Parliament to ensure that he could be kept in jail: he spent another six years, at the Robben Island maximum security prison, kept separate from other prisoners.

Then he was released, but under severe restriction orders which confined him to the town of Kimberley and prohibited him from attending meetings or being with more than one person at a time. Nothing he said could be quoted.

The first five years of his banning ended in 1974. The banning was renewed. He died, from cancer, in Kimberley, in 1978.

- 2) The South African government treated Sobukwe as it did because he was a man to be feared. His intense belief in African nationalism and in pan-Africanism presented a set of ideas which threatened white domination. His personal integrity, and the lead he had given to blacks by offering himself for prison and by doing so on his stand of no bail, no defence, no fine, offered a principled resistance which could have put him at the head of a mass movement of opposition.

Yet he is vastly more than merely a passing figure in history. For his enunciation of nationalism made him the father of the modern-day black consciousness movement in South Africa; he was the person to whom such as Steve Biko looked for guidance and spirit. Yet Sobukwe's African nationalism was not a racially exclusivist outlook: he was a supreme nonracialist.

- 3) He was born and grew up in the small Eastern Cape town of Graaff Reinet. His father was a poorly paid woodcutter. There was encouragement of learning in the home (Sobukwe's elder

brother, Ernest, became an Anglican Bishop, retiring early this year). Sobukwe went to school at Healdtown, and when the money for further education ran out, was helped by a white man, an experience he never forgot. Then to Fort Hare University College, the segregated college for blacks at Alice. He was there during the years of the Second World War, when ideas of African nationalism first took root there. Among his fellow students were Nelson Mandela and Gatsha Buthelezi.

At school he learnt about the "Kaffir Wars" and dutifully produced what was needed to pass his examinations. There was virtually no political motivation in him. Only at Fort Hare, when he studied "Native Administration", was his interest aroused in politics and in the place of blacks in society. He became involved in student politics.

From there he entered teaching and was at Standerton, in the Transvaal, when the ANC called its Defiance Campaign in 1952, with the idea that people should defy apartheid laws and go to jail. Sobukwe did not participate, even though he was a member of the ANC.

From Standerton he accepted a position as language assistant in Zulu at the University of Witwatersrand.

(It was at this stage, in 1958, that we met: my first wife was a student of his, and I had recently come to Johannesburg from Cape Town and had an interest in black politics).

5) Sobukwe was now involved in the Africanist movement inside the ANC. It was a movement which argued for African Nationalism, and for techniques of non-collaboration in terms of the "Programme of Action" adopted by the ANC in 1949. It was a movement vehemently opposed to communist influences in the ANC.

The conflicts resulted in the Africanist breakaway in 1958, and the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress in April, 1959, with Sobukwe as president.

Shortly before the founding congress, Sobukwe went through a personal crisis: Rhodes University, in the Eastern Cape, offered him a fulltime lectureship, as opposed to the lesser teaching position he had at Witwatersrand University. It was an unusual distinction for a black man in South Africa to be offered such a position and Sobukwe was tempted by it. He had already written some poetry and enjoyed academic life. He had a wife, Zodwa (a midwife), who had recently had twin sons to add to the older son and daughter. After agonising about it, he decided he had a duty to his people and that he had to continue in politics.

Sobukwe himself was a total nonracist emphasising a broad approach to African Nationalism: that everyone who was of Africa, and was committed to Africa, was an African, irrespective of his colour.

But in practice, it was not always as pure as this. On one occasion, at a PAC conference in Soweto, I was the only white person present (which was invariably the case). Some in the audience objected to my presence, even though I was there as a journalist. Sobukwe, extremely embarrassed, had to ask me

to leave. We had a tough discussion about this afterwards, one of many in which we combed over Africanism and the role of other colour groups.

He had around him a strange assortment of people: Zeph Mothopeng, a former teacher, who earlier this year was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment by a South African judge for seeking to revive the PAC; P.K. Leballo, an out and out white-hater, who was this year deposed in Tanzania as leader of the PAC in exile.

Because of his academic background, Sobukwe was known as "Prof". He had a quiet, earnest way of addressing meetings; in private conversations he had a habit of raising his long index finger of his right hand and punctuating his comments with a "Thaaat's right!" It was a habit his younger followers imitated.

- 5) The decision to act against the heart of apartheid, the pass laws, was taken late in 1959 and the date was set for Monday, March 21, 1960.

On the Friday before, he issued a statement announcing it would be a non-violent campaign and calling on the police to respect this. He also resigned from the university.

- 6) In the early hours of the Monday I was at his home - a modest house in Soweto - and when he set off for the Orlando police station, I drove behind him.

Later in the morning, when word came through that there had been shooting at Bopholong, about 20 miles away, I

went to say goodbye to him where he was sitting with his followers, waiting to be arrested.

From Bopholong I drove on to Sharpeville, and was there when the shooting took place.

Sobukwe was arrested that morning and was criminally prosecuted. We met each other again some two years later, when he was in Pretoria Prison. He was sewing mailbags alongside Nelson Mandela, recently captured after returning secretly to South Africa after travelling around Africa.

A few days before Sobukwe's three years in jail ended, came the special law to keep him in detention. He was flown to Robben Island.

7) Conditions of imprisonment: (I was allowed to visit him four times for a day at a time. I have a full record of our political discussions).

He was kept in isolation: apart from the warders on guard over the fenced-in compound where he was kept, he had only occasional visitors, later restricted only to his immediate family.

Full details of his conditions of imprisonment including:

- He was allowed a radio, (but local stations only), record player, his own clothing, desk chair, cigars, etc. (all these facilities were developed over a period of time).

- The anxiety by the head warder in charge of him about a possible attempt to poison him.

- The admiration of prison staff for him, equating him

as "a great South African" with Prime Minister Verwoerd.

- The attempts to persuade him to change his views.

When this failed, he was left to rot on his own.

- The visit to him by the Minister of Justice, Pelser.

Sobukwe liked him as an "unprejudiced man".

- The fear by priests, of his own and other churches, to minister to him. Sobukwe, who had been a lay preacher in the Methodist Church, renounced the Church in reaction to this but struggled to maintain his faith in God. He eventually told the prison authorities that should any priests wish to see him he did not want to see them - and was then embarrassed because the next visitor, a short while later, was his brother, then an Anglican priest.

- Later, his wife was allowed to spend her annual holiday with him locked into his compound. We had to pay for her prison meals.

- He described indignities inflicted on him.

- He completed a university degree by mail.

- Correspondence was a complicated matter: letters were often held up for 3 weeks or more; if there was anything to which the authorities objected, the letter simply wasn't handed on and we were not told. Now and again he was warned to desist from writing about politics.

- He received a wide variety of books from me. On one occasion the Security Police called me in to threaten a charge of distributing banned books because I had, inadvertently sent him such a book c/o the Officer Commanding.

- Each year, as May came round, there was hope for his release. Each year the hope was dashed. Six years went by.

- Sobukwe grew in stature. There was a singular lack of

hatred or animosity towards his captors (except for the taunts which passed between him and the warders on 24-hour guard). He had a simple belief that there was purpose in his being on the Island. Finally, however, the virtual solitary confinement began to have an effect. The moment the authorities realised this he was released and dumped in Kimberley under severe banning orders. This was in 1969.

- 8) He started working for a black solicitor in Kimberley, who paid him a pittance and delayed registering his legal articles for as long as possible so as to exploit Sobukwe's name. He had a large house in the black township of Galeshewe, provided by the Government, and was under increasing police surveillance (I visited Kimberley regularly to see him, and for several years, until a showdown ensued, we were followed around).

He decided to leave South Africa, under pressure from his wife and for the sake of his family, to take up a university position in America. He was refused a passport but in terms of the law the Minister of the Interior was obliged to grant him an "exit permit" to allow him to leave the country on a one-way ticket; but the Minister of Justice refused to relax the banning orders to allow him to get to the international airport in Johannesburg. We took the matter to court, but finally lost it in the Appeal Court. Sobukwe accepted the outcome stoically. "It is God's will," was his comment; he was clearly relieved that the decision had been taken for him.

He qualified as an attorney and set up his own practice, which was soon highly successful.

In a racial situation, we took pleasure in small things: such as when we found a tea-room with a separate section for "nonwhites" where no one objected to our sitting together; and when Sobukwe became friendly with a local Indian man who gave us the free use of his home: we celebrated the day we could sit down together in comfort in a sitting-room together, but always with a watchful eye in case the Security Police came. Until then we had to roam around Kimberley, driving as far as the town limits and seeking a patch of shade under a thorn-tree, often with the police sitting in their car a short distance away.

He had a strange relationship with the local Security Police members. On his side, he was always pleasant and polite, holding no malice against them. They in turn developed an attitude where, while upholding the restrictions against him, they approached him with respect.

He walked the streets of Kimberley with blacks and coloureds giving him friendly greetings. Whites were reserved but polite. A bank teller persisted in calling him "Robert" until Sobukwe told him firmly they were not friends and his name was "Mr Sobukwe".

He resumed attending church, and acted as an interpreter for a black minister, standing in front of the preacher during sermons. The police called on the minister and threatened criminal charges because Sobukwe was making public statements. The priest dropped Sobukwe.

There were visitors to Sobukwe: the young black consciousness leaders came to consult him. From Cape Town, white liberal women who had helped to look after arrangements for him on the Island came to see him. But the local management of the De Beers diamond company were scared to be remotely connected with him.

One visitor was Andrew Young, then a little-known congressman. As a result of this, Young invited Sobukwe's two oldest children to come to stay with his family in the US and to attend college there. Later, Young as the friend of the newly-elected President Carter, again visited Sobukwe. The contacts solidified Young's interest in South Africa and it was this interest which was a major reason for his accepting the US ambassador's post at the UN.

Others, such as journalists, politicians and academics from abroad also went to visit him, and returned after meeting him with impressions of this quiet, courteous man who retained a sense of humour and who was sitting on the sidelines waiting to be called.

On a few occasions Sobukwe was allowed to visit Johannesburg: once for a medical check-up and when a son was ill in hospital. On each occasion he was allowed out of Kimberley between midnight Friday until midnight Sunday. To make full use of the time he was driven through the night to Johannesburg.

In mid-1977 he was ill and the events that ensued, ending in his death on February 27, 1978, are described in the attached Rnad Daily Mail article dated March 14, 1978. This summarises

the facts of what happened: but how to convey the sense of fear at the time in begging the authorities for permission for him to receive medical attention, lest they withdrew the concessions already granted?

- 9) This was a man who had the intellectual power, the personality, the integrity, the love of people, to be the leader of a new South Africa. His tragedy, and that of South Africa, was that he was spurned and kept locked away by the ruling whites. Despite everything done to him - the deprivation of his liberty, the rejection of him, the humiliations heaped on him - there was seldom anger in him. He felt pity and sorrow for his captors.

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Robert Sobukwe Papers

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