

Sharpeville, and after

The excitement and publicity surrounding the release of Nelson Mandela and the other black leaders in South Africa has partially eclipsed the memory of Robert Sobukwe who, had he lived, would certainly have been one of the leading participants in the historic negotiations now underway there.

Sobukwe, who died of cancer in 1978, was the leader of the Pan-Africanist Congress, which broke away from the ANC in the late 1950s, and the man who put into motion the events which led to the massacre of non-violent protesters in Sharpeville in 1960 — which profoundly changed the course of South African history.

So terrified was the apartheid regime of Sobukwe's power and potential that it rushed through parliament a special law used to jail him without trial, a law renewed annually while he was held in virtual solitary confinement on the notorious Robben Island until 1969.

Only when he began deteriorate, mentally and physically, was he released — but under draconian restrictions which precluded any political activity, confined him to a tiny area around Kimberley, and restricted even his access to the medical treatment which might have saved his life.

The dramatic and important story is revealed in a new biography, *How Can Man Die Better . . . Sobukwe and Apartheid*, by Benjamin Pogrund, former deputy editor of the Rand Daily Mail, published last week by Peter Halban Publishers at £14.95.

It is a remarkable book; not only because Sobukwe's life was an extraordinary and fascinating one, but because Pogrund too is a remarkable person, and what he has written is both a scholarly biography and a gripping personal account of the times and of the deep friendship which existed between the two men.

As a young reporter on the admirable Rand Daily Mail in Johannesburg in 1958, Pogrund launched himself on the

lonely road of reporting on black political affairs at a time when blacks usually appeared in the white-owned press only as rioters, political agitators or criminals.

Pogrund, who now lives in Ulysses Road, West Hampstead, was the only white reporter to attend black political meetings in those early years, meetings which were frequently five or six hours late, and often long and acrimonious affairs.

"I simply had more perseverance and more patience, and in those days I smoked more than anyone else. I was just dogged and would simply outsit everyone else, two or three days at a time, and late at night. No-one else had that sort of patience," he told me.

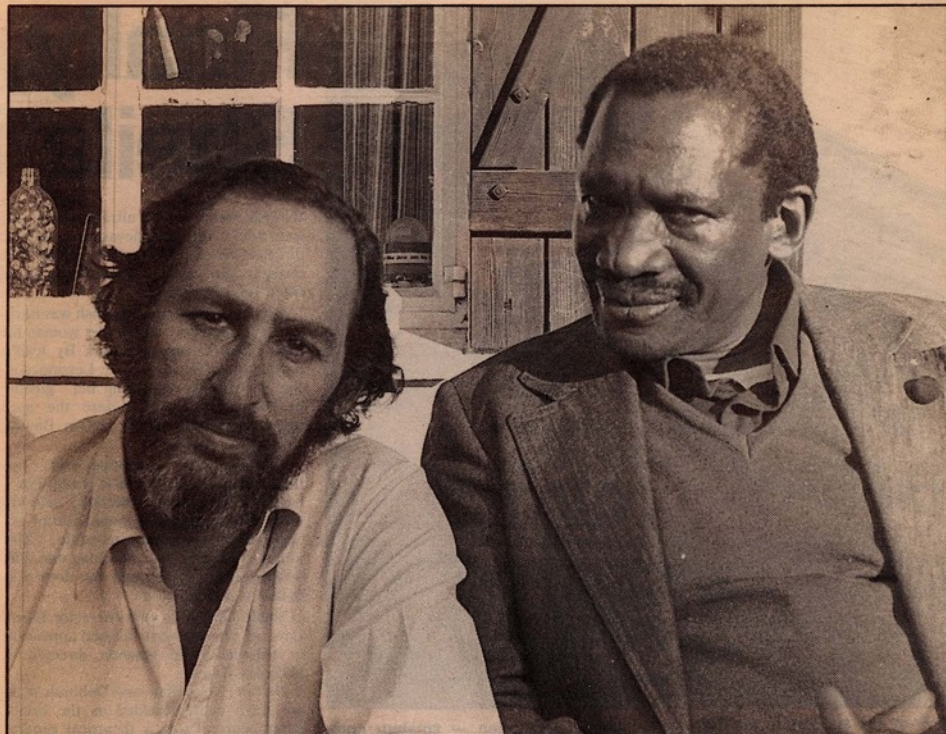
No-one else had that sort of commitment, either. The outcome was that not only did Pogrund start writing important articles about developments in black politics, but he also made close and enduring friendships with a host of black people — including Sobukwe, Mandela and others whose very existence was then unknown to white South Africa.

Thus Pogrund was the only white reporter present at the historic meeting at which the PAC split off from the ANC, demanding a more positive course of non-violent action and stressing more the need for a unified black African identity.

It was a political philosophy, sometimes expressed in the phrase "Africa for the Africans" which led most whites to conclude that the PAC was an anti-white organisation. Pogrund disputes this.

"Sobukwe himself was a total non-racist. He didn't really know what it meant. And around him he had some remarkably fine people. But there were also in the PAC some people who were highly hostile to whites, but they were a minority."

It was the PAC which organised the defiance campaign which led thousands to march on police stations across the country on March 21, 1960, demanding to be arrested because they were not carrying their hated pass books. In one such peaceful demonstration, in a township



● Benjamin Pogrund with Robert Sobukwe in 1977, a year before the PAC activist died.

called Sharpeville, the police panicked and opened fire on the crowd.

Pogrund himself was nearly killed at Sharpeville when the crowd turned nasty at the sight of a white man in a car just after scores of people had been shot dead.

He had been chatting amicably to people in the crowd, but then, in a split second, the mood changed when someone threw a rock and mayhem reigned for a few minutes. "I was very lucky to escape. I was as close to death as anyone could possibly be."

Sobukwe was arrested and sent to prison for three years for inciting the demonstrations, and never again experienced real freedom. As his three-year term drew to an end the frightened regime passed a law specifically designed to keep him locked up without charge or trial, "in the interests of national security".

Pogrund explained: "He had already given them the biggest fright that a white government had ever had in the country. He set in train the set of events which brought the white government to its greatest-ever crisis.

"He was such a force that they were frightened that he would unite blacks on a scale which had not been seen before . . . He was propagating an enormously powerful force — unified black nationalism, and that was the one thing they feared more than anything else."

That indefinite, lonely incarceration on Robben Island, although Sobukwe had more privileges than convicted prisoners such as Mandela, and despite Pogrund's strenuous efforts to make his existence there more comfortable, took a terrible toll because he was separated from other blacks and was allowed few visitors.

He was finally released in 1969 and

virtually incarcerated in a small township near Kimberley where he added legal training to his impressive list of qualifications and degrees, and became a solicitor. And in the end, petty restrictions resulted in a lack of proper medical attention when he fell ill.

"Time and time again when I went to see people like Sobukwe in jail I came away in a state of absolute fury at the waste of life, the waste of talent. People who have opposed, who have been beaten down, killed and driven out of the country — when they could have been doing so much for that place," says Pogrund.

"It's been one of the great stupidities of the white rulers there."

Matthew Lewin

A limited number of signed copies of Benjamin Pogrund's book are available at Waterstone's bookshop in Hampstead High Street.

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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