

SELLY OAK COLLEGES

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17 August, 1981

Dear Benjie,

I do apologise for all the delay in getting this story to you. At the moment, I'm spending a few quiet days in hospital and therefore have time to reflect. I've just worked out that since leaving the country (S.A. i.e.) almost exactly 3 years ago, I've travelled something like 70,000 miles. There have of course been 100's of interviews, lectures, etc. during that time. In between I've been exhausted and often unwell, so no doubt all this is a good reason for being where I am at the moment.

At any rate this is really all by way of excuse and apology.....

Now in regard to the information you want, you will appreciate that at the time of my banning so many of our documents were confiscated (stolen) by the invaders of our home and office, that nearly all the relevant stuff is irrecoverable. But now I'm simply recording all I remember and leave it to your discretion to use whatever you want. I'll try to put it into sequence.

I was appointed as Methodist Chaplain to the Island on 22.9.1965 and I still have the letter of appointment which states:

"I have pleasure in informing you that you are hereby appointed as a religious worker at the Robben Island Prison, to minister spiritually to all prisoners who are members of the Methodist Church, provided no cost to the State will be incurred and subject to possible future review....."

The Department trusts that your contribution and efforts in the field of religious instruction and spiritual care of the prisoners will be successful."

At that time I was the Methodist Minister in Sea Point and the chaplaincy was of course a part-time appointment. Most of the main denominations

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have part-time prison chaplains. As far as the Island is concerned, it is ^{only} really the DRC who had a full-time chaplain, but then he visits virtually the staff only. There are not many black BR prisoners:

Right The first thing I did was to study the regulations explaining the duties of chaplains. These were not provided by the Dept., but I consulted the Anglican chaplain of the time, a grand old man, Canon Hughes. The regulations (of that time at any rate) state that it is the duty of chaplains to discover from the prison register the names of prisoners belonging to their denomination and visit them.

I had great difficulty in discovering this information. On my first visit, without any opportunity of access to registers, I was marched under escort through the main building into a large barrack square with its typical barbed wire fence and watch-towers with armed guards keeping constant vigilance. In the middle of the square was a hall where about 100 prisoners, of course under armed guard, were gathered. After the service, I was not given the opportunity of greeting anyone. I was taken to lunch in the officers' mess, and seated at a solitary table. After that I was escorted back to the ferry.

Once at home, I re-examined the regulations for prison chaplains, which specifically stated (at least at that time), that it was the chaplain's "duty" to find out the names of prisoners belonging to his denomination. Now of course, I knew that both Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe were Methodists and that Robert was not a prisoner as such, but a banned person.

Again, so far as I remember, chaplains were allowed monthly visits, so on my next visit after the same routine as the previous occasion, I asked to see the prison register, only to be told this was impossible. I produced the regulations for prison chaplains and after the inevitable bureaucratic procedures was told that they would see what could be done next time I visited.

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On subsequent visits I simply went ahead & did my own thing

On the next visit, I made a specific request to see both Nelson Mandela and Robert Sobukwe. Again there was a lot of hedging, but I ultimately insisted on seeing the Officer Commanding the Island, Major Kellerman. Permission was then granted for me to see both Nelson and Robert. As your interest surrounds the person of Robert, I will now concentrate on this.

As you know, Robert was confined to a tiny cottage, which, as far as I can remember, consisted of one room with a toilet and I think shower facilities. The cottage was surrounded by a barbed wire fence, and there was a permanent armed guard. I was accompanied by a senior ranking officer and allowed a visit of not more than 20 minutes to half an hour. As this was the first time we had met, Robert obviously greeted me with some reservation, but on the other hand, he did know about me. (Here at this point I should say that I had for some years, as you know, been speaking out about Government policies and had received quite a lot of press publicity. As Robert was allowed newspapers and also had a small radio, he obviously had some knowledge of where I stood).

Again relying on what is now rather distant memory, I am fairly sure that it was not until January 1966 that I first saw Robert, and after that I think on only 3 occasions, because my visits to the Island were fairly sporadic. On 4 August, 1966, I received a letter from the Department, which simply stated:

"I have to inform you that on review it has been decided to cancel, with effect from the date hereof, your appointment as Religious Worker on behalf of the Methodist Church at the Robben Island Prison. Kindly forward your original letter of appointment to me for formal cancellation.

A copy hereof has been forwarded to the Officer Commanding, Robben Island Prison, for his information.

Yours faithfully,
(Sgd.) J.C. Steyn,
COMMISSIONER OF PRISONS.

There followed correspondence between myself and also the Methodist Church with the Commissioner of Prisons. The Church demanded reasons for the cancellation of my appointment. I quote from Gen. Steyn's reply:

"... Lest you should think I have acted willy-nilly in cancelling the Rev. Kotze's appointment, I wish to make it plain at the onset that this was not the case.

This Department deals with persons who have been deprived of their freedom as a result of which their conduct and behaviour often differ from that of people in free society. Similarly, techniques and methods of treatment that are often crowned with success in free life often fail in prisons. Indeed, even members of the service often have their progress in the Department retarded because of their inability to fit into the general framework of departmental policy. Religious workers, as human beings, may also sometimes fail to conform with the Department's views on the correct approach towards prisoners....."

My own view of all this, was that on all my visits, I felt I was not meeting "prisoners", but fellow human beings and behaved accordingly. ^

To get back to Robert, in the short time, we established a bond of friendship, which as you know in latter years developed into a very deep relationship, certainly one of the most precious of my life. One incident on the Island remains a vivid memory; in all the time Robert had been on the Island, no-one had given him Holy Communion. I discussed this with him and he requested that on my next visit I should share this Sacrament with him. Every visit or interview with any person was always in the presence of an officer with at least the rank of Captain, so you must now picture a scene in Robert's tiny cottage with himself, Capt. van Wyck and myself. It is the custom in the Methodist Church to invite all those "who sincerely love our Lord" of whatever denomination to

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*Such as shaking hands
inquiry after his health etc.*

*Do not raise about
the name*

partake of Holy Communion, I therefore asked the Capt. if he was a Christian, to which he made an emphatic affirmative reply and therefore invited him to join us in the Communion. He refused to do so, but when Robert and I knelt at a little wooden stool to share the elements of bread and wine, van Wyk came and stood over us. Obviously he was suspicious that I might pass a surreptitious message or something. It was an extraordinary feeling, I should think not unlike the early Christian experiences in the catacombs of Rome. At any rate, Robert and I often talked about it in later years. That was my last visit to the Island.

There were subsequent events which affected Robert deeply, and I only heard about them when I visited him in Kimberley shortly after he was released from the Island and banned. I cannot remember the year but you will know. The Methodist Church appointed as my successor as Chaplain to the Island, the Rev. Francis MacCreath. I think that almost any of our Methodist Ministers would agree with me that MacCreath was, to say the least, a very difficult man. He was an old-school type, who had a very rigid fundamentalist attitude. He would have considered Robert a "sinner", and indeed Robert told me that on his first visit to him, MacCreath simply read him a lecture which asserted that Robert deserved to be where he was. After this incident, Robert refused to see MacCreath or any other Minister again. I really do not want to say more about MacCreath because he is dead and cannot answer for himself, but there is no doubt that his visit had a serious effect upon Robert.

You know that I visited him frequently in the years that he was in Kimberley and that I saw him almost every day during the time he was in Groote Schuur Hospital. I was, again as you know, banned in October 1977, but Helen continued to visit him regularly. It is worth recording that Robert and I (both banned people at the time) did meet on one occasion, but where and under what circumstances I am not prepared to

say. I mention this because one of the things he taught me was that it is always possible to transcend any circumstances, provided you have the courage, ingenuity and, above all, sense of humour. Robert Sobukwe had an abundance of all these. He was amongst the bravest and the best of men, and surely one of South Africa's noblest sons. I loved him deeply and from his hospital bed he expressed his love for me - that is something, that I shall treasure for the rest of my life.

Somewhere in my records, there is a copy of a letter that I wrote to eldest son just after I had visited Robert in Kimberley for the first time. Helen and I have searched for this, but we are going to make a further very intensive search, and if we do manage to unearth this, I may have some further information for you.

I hope that all this reaches you safely; I shall be anxiously awaiting acknowledgement. Please give Helen and my warm love to Veronica; indeed we would be so grateful to have her present address and to know about her circumstances.

With warm greetings and best wishes,

Yours sincerely,



Rev. Dr. Theo Kotze

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P.S. There may be questions you have to ask, in which case do not hesitate to contact me.

PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- **Historical Papers, The Library, University of the Witwatersrand**

Location:- **Johannesburg**

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DOCUMENT DETAILS:

Document ID:- **A2618-C19**

Document Title:- **Letter to Benjamin Pogrud: from prior Methodist Chaplain on Robben Island (original, signed)**

Author:- **Theo Kotze**

Document Date:- **17-08-1981**