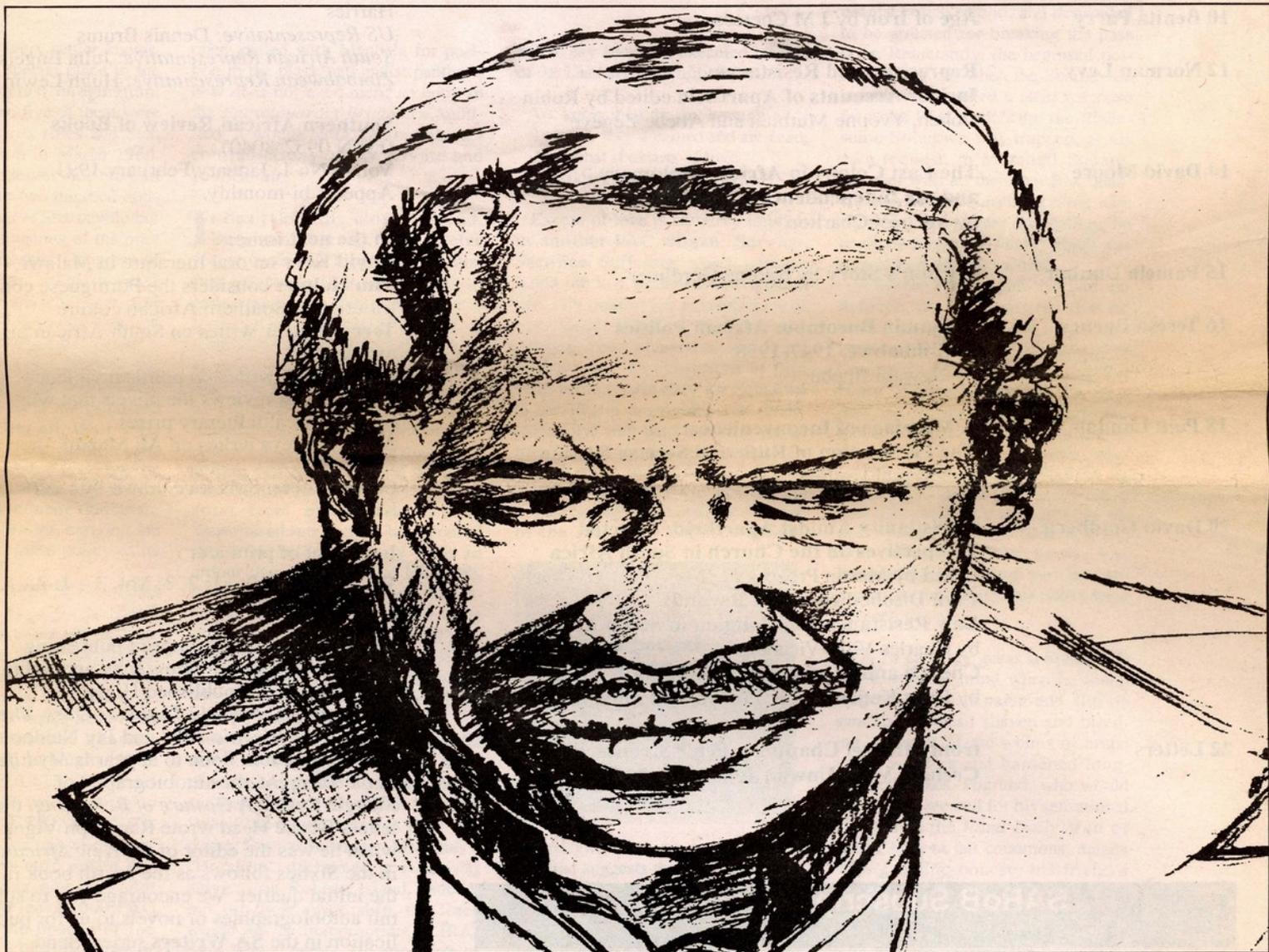


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Ann Harries **Sobukwe's Fearful Odds**



Kevin Carlean ***The Guardian* in South Africa**



Norman Levy **The Young Lives Have It**



Benita Parry **Thanatophany for South Africa**



Paul Landau **The Persecution of Ruth and Seretse Khama**

# Sobukwe's Fearful Odds

Ann Harries reviews the life of Robert Sobukwe who never committed or planned to commit any act of violence, and came to be regarded by the South African government as so dangerous a man that a unique law had to be invented to hold him apart from society

Bullets, as every settler knows, occupy a special place in the Pan-Africanist imagination. Seven hundred and five of them were fired from revolvers, rifles and Sten guns one afternoon in March 1960, embedding themselves not only in the backs of some two hundred anti-pass demonstrators at Sharpeville but also in the consciousness of the one-year-old Pan-Africanist Congress of South Africa (PAC). Thirty years later the wounds are still there, and though there has been little evidence of armed struggle in recent times, it would be unwise to dismiss 'one settler one bullet' as purely an exercise in literary style by a marginalised organisation. After all, their 1963 offshoot, Poqo — the name means the same as Sinn Fein ('The Pure' or 'Our Own') — is still the only liberation group to have made deliberate armed attacks on whites, carrying the general PAC anti-white policy to its logical conclusion.

And then there is Sobukwe, founding father and first president of the PAC in South Africa (not yet Azania). Sobukwe was not a man for bullets. His instructions to anti-pass campaigners, read out in PAC meetings across the country, could have been penned by the Mahatma himself: 'Our people must be taught NOW AND CONTINUOUSLY THAT IN THIS CAMPAIGN we are going to observe ABSOLUTE NON-VIOLENCE'. 'Ab-so-lute non-vi-o-lence' chanted Sobukwe's most ardent disciple, Philip Ngosana, nine days after Sharpeville as he led 30,000 PAC protesters from the hostels of the township ghettos into the heart of terror-stricken Cape Town.

Did the spectre of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe haunt the first PAC conference (in November) to be held inside South Africa since its banning thirty years ago? How does their first president's wordier aphorism 'There is only one race to which we all belong and that is the Human Race' square up with current PAC perceptions of Azanian population groups? It is twelve years now since Sobukwe died of lung cancer in a non-white hospital ward, just a few months after the blaze of publicity that surrounded the murder of another of his admirers, Steve Biko. The man who masterminded one of the most significant events in South African history and

once jostled with Mandela for position in the black nationalist pantheon now does not even merit an entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, nullified, it would seem, by the inherent contradictions of his private and political life.

It has taken his closest friend, Benjamin Pogrund, some twelve years to write his biography, the first ever to appear. It is not difficult to understand why this much-needed book has been so long in coming. A monogamous, god-fearing, politely spoken teetotaler, who never committed or planned to commit any act of violence, Sobukwe came to be regarded by the South African government as so dangerous a man that a unique law which would bear his name had to be invented to hold him apart from society. An utterly Westernised intellectual, he espoused the Africanist ideology with an ardour that would lead to his death. Pogrund, the white liberal blood-brother of the leader of an anti-white liberation movement, himself partakes of the Sobukwe paradox. It can be no coincidence that Sobukwe wrote his BA Honours thesis on the topic of Xhosa riddles.

In keeping with these ironies, the very title of Pogrund's book is more of an unanswerable Zen koan than a serious question. 'How Can Man Die Better?' is a line from that PAC favourite, Thomas Babington Macaulay's 'Horatius', declaimed at memorial services on Robben Island. Indeed, but for their authorship, the lines would not be inappropriate at IRA/Sinn Fein funerals. Horatius, left to defend the bridge on his own against the entire Etruscan army, welcomes the opportunity to die for his country.

And how can man die better  
Than facing fearful odds,  
For the ashes of his fathers,  
And the temples of his gods?

The glorification of martyrdom is understandable in Catholic Ireland, but surely the sacrifice of Sobukwe's fine mind cannot be seen as a glorious achievement, leaving the young Africanist liberation movement to split itself apart with feuding, expulsions and power struggles. Yeats, who knew about martyrs, and the terrible beauty which they generate, had

this to say about the executed leaders of the Dublin Easter uprising:

We know their dream: enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?

Excess of love is certainly implicit in another PAC slogan: Service, Sacrifice, Suffering; which perhaps holds the key to Sobukwe's wasted life, as it does to the tortured lives of two recently deceased Pan-Africanist leaders, Jafta Masemola and Zeph Mothopeng. Commitment at this level made it necessary for Sobukwe to sacrifice a prestigious and (comparatively) well-paid lecturing job at the Witwatersrand University in Johannesburg so that, like Gandhi, he could be seen to go to jail for his beliefs, going to jail being at the core of the anti-pass 'positive action'

How Can Man Die Better ...  
Sobukwe and Apartheid  
by Benjamin Pogrund

Peter Halban (London),  
288pp., May, £14.95

campaign which he spearheaded. Pogrund suggests that this fierce personal pride was influenced by John Galsworthy's play 'Strife' in which David Roberts, a sort of Arthur Scargill-Bobbie Sands figure, endures extremes of privation to lead his striking workforces against the tyranny of the bosses. Was the gentle, courteous Sobukwe bewildered by excess commitment when he proclaimed at a public meeting: 'I have a wife and four children, at 684 Mofolo, of whom I am very fond. If I don't launch [the anti-pass campaign], you can go and burn them down in the house'? What Sobukwe's wife Veronica thought of this offer we do not hear.

The organisation of the 'positive action' campaign had been a fiasco: the date had already been shifted once because, to Sobukwe's horror, the campaign leaflets had not been printed in time, but the publicity

material for the new date was still totally inadequate. The African National Congress, invited to 'create history' with the Africanists, replied with words not irrelevant to their own situation today: 'We must avoid sensational actions which might not succeed, because we realise that it is treacherous to the liberation movement not to embark on a campaign which has not been properly prepared for and which has no reasonable prospect of success'. Again, Pogrund does not comment on this judgement.

The extremes of service, sacrifice and suffering began to acquire the dimensions of a Shakespearean rather than a Galsworthian tragedy when Sobukwe, along with thousands of his followers across the country, took the fatal steps — literally — to the nearest police station, and demanded to be arrested for breaking the pass laws. Reluctantly, the bemused police obliged. So when the Sharpeville massacre demanded a clear response from the PAC leadership, the riddle-some Sobukwe was trapped, at his own request, in Marshall Square, together with all the other PAC leaders who had been arrested along with their members. There was nothing he could do about the 'Strife' which was now loosed upon the world.

A further PAC slogan 'No bail, no defence, no fine' ensured that he remained in jail for the next three years on the charge of incitement to commit an offence, rather than the minor offence of breaking the pass laws. A shy and unknown part-time typist became the Acting President of the PAC for the next two years, relying on messages smuggled out by Sobukwe to direct the membership. And the change brought about to the pass system (called, without a hint of irony, the Abolition of Passes Act) was entirely in keeping with the perversity of the times: Pass books were reduced in size.

We can only guess at Sobukwe's state of mind when he found himself in *tsotsi* pants and slip-on sandals, his head shaven and bleeding, a victim of the whims of brutal white warders and hardened long-term criminals. Pogrund, who would later be prosecuted for his sensational exposés in the *Rand Daily Mail* of South African jail conditions, details with grinding honesty his friend's prison routine. There is a cosy cameo of Mandela and Sobukwe stitching mailbags together while arguing over who was the greatest English writer, Shakespeare or Shaw (who argued for whom?), but the three-years hard labour, comfortless cell conditions and inadequate diet must have done immense harm to Sobukwe's health and hastened his tragically early death at fifty-four. However, his physical sufferings were nothing compared with the mental tortures which were to follow. At the end of the three years, Vorster declared to Parliament:

... there has been no change of heart in him during the time he has not been in our midst ... we are dealing with a person who has a strong, magnetic personality, a person who can organise, a person who feels that he has a vocation to

perform this task [of challenging the security of the State] ... (p. 179)

Largely as a result of Poqo's attacks (from which Sobukwe dissociated himself), the notorious 'Sobukwe clause' of the General Law Amendment Act was devised to keep this strong magnetic personality out of circulation for a year at a time, not exactly in jail, but in exile. Each year his attitude would be examined for a 'change of heart' that would bring about his release. Sobukwe, the declared enemy of communism, was detained under the Suppression of Communism Act and sent to Robben Island.

'I am afraid my needs grow with the years: I certainly will wish to replace the sheets and the shirts and the pyjamas. They're all worn out. The shirts will be size 16 1/2 and please make them striped or checked, but NOT white.' (Sobukwe to Pogrud, June 1965)

On the face of it, there could be worse places of exile than a seaside cottage with the most magnificent view in the world — the blue curve of Table Bay overhung by Table mountain and a frill of sibling peaklets. Books, music, newspapers, luxury food items, gardening, visitors (including Veronica and family) were allowed. But for Sobukwe, the view beyond the barbed wire enclosure might have been a painted backdrop, and the luxury items were embarrassments. For as if trying to prove some grandiose experimental hypothesis about deprivation, the authorities placed Sobukwe and his little comforts side by side with a prison full of 'politicals' who endured unimaginably harsh conditions, but had in abundance what Sobukwe yearned for most: company, debate, comradeship. There is a scene of terrible desolation when PAC prisoners, *en route* to the Seashore to collect seaweed, raise their right hands to salute the lonely figure in his garden. It was on this occasion that one of the PAC men declaimed Macaulay's 'Horatius' in Xhosa: this wildly romanticised poetry seems suddenly necessary to survival on a prison island.

Counterpointed against Sobukwe's impotence and solitude, Pogrud's own life seemed positively hyperactive. The next eight years would be spent frenziedly budgeting and fundraising to support Veronica and the four children, as well as to keep Robert supplied with shirts, heaters, chairs: every detail is scrupulously catalogued, from the exact area of Sobukwe's living space to the length of his inner leg. (There is no mention of Gordon Winters' claim that the CIA subsidised the Sobukwe family throughout Robert's exile on the island.)

At the same time Pogrud's weakness for the 'skirt world' caused his marriage to break down, while his jail exposés for the *Rand Daily Mail* nearly landed him in prison himself. Somehow, in between being whipped off to hospital for an ulcer operation and appearing in court with *Rand Daily Mail* editor, Lawrence Gandar, for an extended trial, he managed not only to attend to Sobukwe's every

need and send literally hundreds of books to the island, but also to engage in full-time correspondence with his friend in an attempt to compensate for the devastating solitude of exile.

Though able to study for London University degrees, Sobukwe found the almost total isolation affecting his concentration adversely. No wonder this lover of words told an appalled Helen Suzman, on her visit to investigate conditions of the island: 'I am forgetting how to speak'. Written language, however, poured from him in a compulsive flow of letters, not only to Pogrud but to sympathisers all over the world. Not least among these was a devoted band of white middle-class women, founder members of the anti-apartheid Black Sash group, with whom he developed deep friendships through their letters and material assistance.

Frustratingly, very few of Sobukwe's letters are reproduced in full in this book. Instead, Pogrud has elected to summarise a chosen few, with extracts from the original texts. This gives some idea of the intensity of the discourse, but obscures Sobukwe's own voice. For example:

Liberalism and conservatism were next for discussion in our letters: they were not mutually exclusive but were complementary, he believed. Liberalism was the 'initiating and experimenting force' of life. But, uncontrolled, liberalism led to chaos. (p. 232)

It seems strange that there is no published anthology of Sobukwe's written expression, as so much of it is in existence. Where are his Xhosa short stories and poems and 'unambitious' English novelette, all written on the island? Apparently he was not allowed to take any of his writings with him, on his release. Are they still on Robben Island? Can someone find out?

Needless to say, both Veronica and Benjie petitioned ceaselessly, though fruitlessly, for Sobukwe's release, as year after year the detention was extended. So it comes as something of a shock to find, amidst the inevitable laundry lists:

... on 24 April (1970) suddenly and unexpectedly, with not a hint in advance, Justice Minister Pelsler issued a statement for publication at midnight announcing that Sobukwe was to be released.

The next three pages offer explanations for 'the distortion in his thinking process' that had led the authorities to rid the island so precipitously of the world's most famous prisoner of conscience: Sobukwe evidently thought a machine was influencing his bodily functions, and the South African government grew scared. According to Pogrud, this psychosis disappeared once Sobukwe was returned to society, but the whole affair is still shrouded in mystery. Probably only Veronica knows the true story.

Sobukwe left the island one morning in May 1970. Pogrud's opening account of this new phase of exile contains a notable omission — which suggests that there are many more

such omissions throughout the book. Nell Marquand was among the Black Sash group who corresponded with and supported Sobukwe, without actually having met him. According to Marq de Villiers, her nephew, Nell was at the foot of the gangplank when Sobukwe returned from the island. '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' (*White Tribe Dreaming*, Macmillan of Canada, 1987).

Surely the return of an island exile to the mainland, if not to unconditional freedom, is an emotional occasion. That visit to Kirstenbosch, to allow Sobukwe to penetrate the third dimension of the mountain, and replenish himself in its perfumes and shadows, was a necessary pilgrimage. Why then does Pogrud dismiss his return thus: 'Sobukwe was taken on the prison ferry boat to the Cape Town docks on the mainland. From there, two security policemen drove him nearly 1,000 kilometres to his new home outside the city of Kimberley. He had no choice'? And why does Benjie proceed to race through the last eight years of Sobukwe's life, having described the island sojourn in such meticulous detail? For this final section, a mere 80 pages, contains some of the least known and most fascinating material in the book, condensed into a lightning resumé.

Although Sobukwe would not be in jail in Kimberley, the six pages of prohibitions which defined his house arrest made normal contact with the outside world impossible. He was under constant surveillance: directional microphones, listening bugs, informers, a conservative community. Nevertheless, he was with his family, and visitors, official or secret, famous or humble, were able to see him — Pogrud's own visits involving subterfuge worthy of a *Cry Freedom 2*. Though politically paralysed, Sobukwe continued to impress

several offers of university work. (In fact, the two oldest Sobukwe children were now living in the States with Andrew Young, then US Ambassador to the United Nations, but this episode is by no means fully explained.) Recognising that he would probably remain in Kimberley for the rest of his life, Sobukwe proceeded to train to qualify as a solicitor, supported financially through his articles by the Canon Collins Trust in London, and in spite of his banning orders was eventually able to run a one-man practice in a small, crowded township office, till he was too ill to continue.

His health, a constant source of anxiety to Pogrud, had been deteriorating steadily during the Kimberley exile, and the last year of his life was dominated by the lung condition that was to kill him. Pogrud's anguished efforts to get proper medical treatment for his friend were continually frustrated by the authorities and make for sickening reading. It seems likely that had there been an early diagnosis of his cancer, Sobukwe would be with us today, aged a mere sixty-six. Still, he died in heart-transplant surgeon Chris Barnard's ward, and Barnard paid for the children to fly back from America for the funeral. Or did he? Barnard later admitted the funds for the air ticket hadn't come from his pocket. The unanswered questions continue long after Sobukwe's death.

Pogrud was not allowed to speak at Sobukwe's funeral, though specifically asked to by Veronica. Hijacked by the young post-Soweto comrades who turned the event into a Black Consciousness forum, the man of peace was buried in a scenario of violence.

It is very difficult to bring a dead saint to life, particularly through the medium of the written word. Perhaps an investigative journalist, with his exclusive interest in presenting the facts, is not the best person to redeem an enigmatic friend from limbo: hack hagiography is the inevitable result. The massive ironies of Sobukwe's life obtrude even into this testament to an extraordinary friendship, for it is not the Pan-Africanist leader who rises from the pages and shakes us by the hand, but Pogrud himself, always ready to admit to his own failures and weaknesses in his amiable though lack-lustre prose. Most readers enjoy revelations about their heroes' laundry, but hope for a more holistic approach. Regrettably, crammed with information and pitted with omissions, this whole is considerably less than the sum of its parts.

Actually, you do not have to open this book to get an idea of who Sobukwe really was. Peering over a thicket of ugly black and gold lettering, an informal cover photograph of Bob taken by Benjie has a cogency that the pages inside altogether lack. Here is a man who is listening intently, humorously, his brow a little furrowed as he formulates his reply. Here is a man who looks as if he is sitting at a negotiating table. □

Ann Harries is the author of *The Sound of the Gora*.



everyone he met. The *New York Times* wrote of his 'magnetic external presence combined with a sense of inner serenity', an observation made by many, which seems to suggest that the mysterious island machine had indeed been exorcised.

Permission was refused to travel to the United States where Sobukwe had

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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