

ROBERT SOBUKWE:

by Nell Marquard

A PERSONAL NOTE

My friendship with Robert Sobukwe began and grew in letters. I first heard of him when my husband told of his reading a manuscript for the Oxford University Press and of his delight in Robert's quiet but scorching sense of humour. Then, in 1960, came his call to Africans to hand in their passes and his arrest and trial. It was the time of Sharpeville and Langa, of Paul Sauer's statement that the old book of South African history had been closed at Sharpeville and of the suspension, for a few days, of the pass laws.

Robert's speech at his trial was impressive and moving in its statesmanlike reasoning, its dignity and its moderation. There was no mistaking his qualities of greatness and leadership. When, after serving his three years' sentence he was confined to Robben Island by the iniquitous "Sobukwe clause" in the General Law Amendment Act, I, like so many others, was deeply shocked, both at the injustice of it and at the thought of a man of his stature and integrity being condemned to the voiceless waste of solitary confinement.

I wrote to ask whether he would like me to send him "The New Yorker" and "The Listener". He welcomed them and I continued to send them to him even after he left the Island, later adding the (Manchester) "Guardian Weekly". From this grew an exchange of letters that lasted over the years.

I knew that everything sent to Robert was subject to strict censorship and I was careful to avoid anything that might interrupt our letters. Even after going to Kimberley he wrote that everything was censored, "so we will continue to keep to the mundane and the innocuous". (He never used exclamation marks.)

A letter from Robert was always an event. His "mundane" included talk of books and articles, happenings in the outside world, education, gardening in the arid soil of Kimberley, and much more. His comments were always interesting and thought-provoking. But what gave his letters their chief interest was the quality of the man himself. The tacit assumption of standards was not infrequently underlined by gentle irony. Humane, compassionate, humorous, his letters were a constant pleasure.

What he did not say was itself a mark of his quality. For all the waste of his best years, all that he lacked of human companionship, of his university work and freedom, he was not bitter. And he never complained. Sometimes he found an outlet in irony. Once he wrote: "I hope you were not alarmed by what Frontman said of me in Parliament. His approach to truth is that of a poet, not of a scientist". Only once did his irony have a bitter tang.

The highlights of his life in detention and restriction were the visits from his wife Veronica and from his four children. He wrote with delight when at last Veronica was to be allowed to spend her visit with him on the Island and not go back and forth to the township. Then after an article about him appeared in a newspaper, a woman offered to finance more frequent visits from his wife. Veronica was a nurse, he said, and could not take unpaid leave from the hospital every so often. "Besides, Oom Danie Nel will tell them that the 'Bantu' is never so happy as when he is away from his wife". But this touch of bitterness was an exception.

Robert's attitude in his own life struck me as being akin to what he once said in speaking of the situation in Europe. "Strange as it may seem, I have no fear of a world conflagration. I have a strong consciousness of God's active inter-

vention in the affairs of the world. We are moving towards God's solution". Whether it was courage or faith or both, I seemed to feel in his letters a steadfast and whole spirit, not aware of its own courage.

A newspaper article said that among his regular correspondents were two ladies "whose interest in him is purely Christian". He felt there might have been the suggestion of a sneer; and fearing they might be deeply hurt because in writing to them he had given them to understand that he "valued the shared Christian experience", he not only wrote to them, but asked me to get in touch with them and assure them of his sincerity.

This considerateness was of a piece with his concern for his friends when, in 1965, he had expected at last to be free, and the "Sobukwe clause" was again invoked. It was a shattering blow to his hopes, but his first thoughts were for his friends. Having received a despondent letter from one of them he said: "I am writing to administer a timely antidote. I'll say more at a later date". He never said that "more", but some time later he ended a letter with: "Don't worry, I am quite all right". That was all he said about himself. Four years later we cabled him from London on his release from Robben Island.

Suffering in others hurt him deeply, and he found Snow's *The Masters* almost insupportable because of a "thin, choking pain that runs through his novels – a kind of primeval, community pain, unaccountable and incurable, that I find difficult to bear". On another occasion, when I had spoken of a time when he could write his memoirs, he quoted some lines from Mayakowsky which contained the sentence (which he did not apply to himself): "Where pain is, there I am". Then he commented on Kennedy's death and the messages of condolence from great men. "It struck me that a certain Jewish agitator was hanged outside Jerusalem and a mere handful mourned his death – among them a one-time tart. But today the great send messages of condolence in the name of that Jewish Rabbi". And he went on to translate a Xhosa condolence: "Daar het nie gebeur wat nie al gebeur het nie: slaap op jou wond".

I have quoted passages that show the serious side of the letters; but there was much more, ordinary, everyday matters, books, places, requests, including one for a rake (which, to my surprise, reached him), amused accounts of Xhosa foibles, and a great deal more.

What astonished me when I thought about it – for I had taken it so for granted – was his natural and unfailing sense of humour, often expressed in ironic comments. It was the ready humour that goes with a balanced outlook and a wholeness of spirit.

Our letters had begun with the slightly formal "talk" of new acquaintances, but had soon become easy, as regard developed into friendship and affection. When I eventually visited Robert in Kimberley he told me more of his experiences on Robben Island than had been possible before. I found the same dignity and warmth I had got to know in his letters and a great natural gentleness. I did not see him again until he went to Groote Schuur, where our meeting was a mutual happiness, though tempered for me by his illness.

When I think now of Robert Sobukwe, I think of the words of a song he once told me the children sang as they played – applicable as it is to his noble spirit:

"Whether we live or die
They will ever remember that we once were". □

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