

HEROES OF OUR REVOLUTION

Walter Sisulu

—Themba Mlotshwa

In the famous "Reichstag Fire" trial, George Dimitrov ably turned the tables on his accusers and delivered a much-remembered indictment against fascism. South Africa, perhaps, leads the world in trials that have a singular feature about them: the South African racists — in courts — are shown for what they really are for the whole world to see.

"The Africans in South Africa are among the best informed about events, particularly in their own country. (By 1960) they were aware that in Africa, one country after another was getting freedom and that the ANC, although it was one of the oldest organizations, was not coming anywhere near their cherished ideals... I was myself convinced that civil war would eventually become inevitable unless the government changed its policy. ...I felt that in the interest of my own people it would be better that we should bring about a state of affairs whereby such violence would be controlled."

The speaker here was Walter Sisulu in the Rivonia Trial, explaining the rationale behind the formation of Umkhonto We Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC.

HIS EARLY DAYS

On the 18th of May Walter Sisulu celebrates his 70th birthday. He was born at Engcobo in the Transkei district of the Cape Province where he was brought up by his mother and an uncle. He was brought up in an atmosphere that respected and upheld both the Christian tenet and African traditions.

South Africa being what it is — and one can but wonder how it was for a bewildered young man of peasant origin — it was infinitely hard for young Walter to get advanced formal education. He left school after Standard Four, when he was 15, in order to assume responsibility for the family when his uncle died.

He couldn't be recruited for underground work on account of his age. But then, he wanted work: he got somebody else's poll-tax receipts and was duly recruited. But — still — his attempts at finding work at Rose Deep Mines were thwarted by a chief clerk who knew his mother. The clerk - who probably knew all the hazards for one so young to work underground — helped him obtain a job with a dairy farmer some miles outside of Germiston. Here Sisulu washed, packed and delivered milk bottles.

He must have had a disagreement with the management here — which act brought the wrath of the powerful upon him — for he was subsequently sjamboked — whipped with a hippo hide — and he tried to leave the dairy farm but was returned. Eventually he left the farm after toiling there for eight long months and worked as a 'kitchen boy' for a mine official. He was soon fired here, too, whereupon he found employment as a mine compound sweeper for a pittance of two pounds five shillings a month.

It is not the object of this essay to go into the difficulties of finding employment in South Africa; those problems must have been unspeakably wearying in the late 1920's. But it is prudent to note that young Walter Sisulu's altercations with the status quo then did not stem from what others might summarily explain away as an inherent rebelliousness of spirit. His refusal to kow-tow to, and be cowed by, his bosses came from mankind's time-tested instinct to reject dehumanization.

In the dawn of the thirties he returned to work in the Rose Deep Mines, at the rock face thousands of feet underground. This was a period of the world economic depression and this trying period was an endless nightmare for a black worker. When he had completed his contract he found work as a 'kitchen boy' at the end of 1931. It is when he was working here in East London that he came face to face with the spectre of being at the beck and call of a tauntui representative of a powerful white minority.

THE ICU

It is in this period that he came into contact with the industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU). In his spare time Sisulu sometimes attended meetings of the ICU, was captivated by Clemens Kadalie's

speeches. It was here, also, that he met Walter Rubusana, a founder member of the ANC.

Soon enough he was working at Premier Biscuits where he learnt his first political lesson in the arena of practical struggle when he led the workers in the bakery out on strike for higher wages. He was, of course, fired and was branded 'agitator'. There is perhaps nothing more enraging to a politically conscious person than to see power being used in a high-handed manner against defenceless people. One evening while travelling on a train Sisulu saw a white ticket-collector confiscating an African child's season ticket. He asked the official why he had done this, but instead of an answer, he became the victim of assault. Unfortunately for the arrogant wielders of power Sisulu was not the turn-the-other-cheek type of a person. He fought back and — as is usual in such cases — was arrested and imprisoned. This initiated him into many such trips he would make to the regime's dungeons.

In the Rivonia Trial there ensued a particularly bitter exchange between Sisulu and prosecutor, Dr Percy Yutar (who should have been feeling a weird kind of dejavu on account of millions of his kinsmen who in about 18 short years earlier, had had Nazi head-hunters sit in judgement over them, with chilling results). Percy Yutar had said that the police don't arrest indiscriminately..

SISULU: I have been persecuted by the police, Special Branch. If there is a man who has been persecuted it is myself. In 1962 I was arrested six times. I know the position in this country.

YUTAR: You do?

SISULU: I wish you were in the position of an African. I wish you were an African to know the position in this country.

Whether most white people don't know the position in this country is, of course, open to debate. But what is clear is that the white minority government will go on riding roughshod over the will and sensibilities of oppressed people. A black person who recognizes this will also recognise the fact that evils that prevail, iniquities and inequalities, cannot be done away with by individuals working in isolation. Racism and apartheid are twin demons that need a concerted effort by people in an organizational structure to exorcise them.

CIVIC AND POLITICAL LIFE

In 1934 Sisulu joined the Orlando Vigilante Association (OVA), an organisation concerning itself with liquor raids, pass raids, influx control and other civic matters. This marked a turning point in his development as he

now participated directly in an organization concerned with the workings of an oppressive administrative system. As he went from job to job, Sisulu studied for his Junior Certificate and also took part in music and debating clubs. The OVA, with Herbert Mdingi as the moving spirit, became a foundation member of the Transvaal Vigilante Association. Sisulu and Mdingi became delegates of the Orlando Association to the Transvaal Association.

From Premier Biscuits, Sisulu went to the newspaper the *Bantu World*, first as a newspaper vendor and later as a distribution agent for *Bantu World*, *Imvo Zabantsundu* and the *Bantu Mirror* of the then Rhodesia. It was in this period that he started writing for the *Bantu World*.

Having been brought up in a culturally conscious family his interest in culture led him to the Orlando Brotherly Society – a cultural organization of which he soon became a leading member. His work in this society brought him to the Chairmanship of the Orlando Musical Association, the Orlando Rugby Club and various activities through membership of the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC).

MEETING WITH THE ANC

It was in these circles, at the end of the thirties, that Sisulu came into contact with J.B. Marks – a veteran trade unionist and member of the CPSA, who was a keen sportsman and able footballer. Through his cousin Samuel Mase he was introduced to leftist literature and this helped to broaden his life-and-world view. This was during those turbulent times of the ascendancy of Japan as a world power and the first rumbles of the World War II. It was in the issue of the World War II that Sisulu parted ways with Mdingi – who had become a close personal friend. Sisulu's position was that the black man shouldn't participate in the war as it was then a war between rival colonial powers..

It was around this period, at the end of the thirties, that he met Dr Dadoo who was then a leader of the Non-European United Front – an organization leading the anti-war campaign. It was this fact that led to Sisulu's seeking Dadoo's acquaintance and services as a medical doctor.

When Sisulu was 28 years old, the year 1940 was to prove to be a turning point in his life. He was recruited into the ANC by Alfred Mbhele, who was a leading trade unionist. This was after he had heard a speech by Dr A.B. Xuma, who became ANC President in December 1940. However,

Sisulu was to become increasingly critical of Dr Xuma's moderate stand. In that same year Sisulu became a treasurer of the ANC Orlando Branch — assuming his first-ever office in the movement in a branch that was active and influential beyond its size.

THE YOUTH LEAGUE

In 1942 Sisulu was delegated by the Orlando Branch to the National Conference where L.E.S. Gama, prompted by a students' strike at Fort Hare, raised the question of youth organisation. It was at this conference that a decision was taken to give greater attention to a youth movement — a decision which culminated in the formation of the ANC Youth League in 1944. It was also at this conference that Sisulu met Moses Kotane, another leading member of the ANC and the Communist Party who had traversed a similar path as Sisulu.

At first active in the ANC Youth League, working with Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Anton Lembede and others, Sisulu was elected to the Youth League as treasurer at its opening meeting held at the Bantu Men's Social Centre. It was in his office that the Youth Leaguers met to discuss their strategy and tactics. One of those who took part in the discussion, Albertina, a nurse, married Sisulu on 15th July, 1944 with Mandela as his bestman. It was at this function at the BMSC that Anton Lembede, who was then President of the Youth League told Albertina, "You are marrying a man who is already married to the nation."

PROGRAMME OF ACTION AND DEFIANCE CAMPAIGN

Sisulu's next major contribution to the development of the ANC was at the 1943 conference which modernised the ANC constitution. The ANC was turned from a federal into a unitary body and the House of Chiefs was abolished. These decisions broadened the perspective of the ANC and made it a true mouth-piece of the Africans. Sisulu, who from his membership to his life sentence had missed only one conference, was together with his colleagues in the Youth League instrumental in this change.

It was at the historic 1949 conference of the ANC, where a new militant leadership was elected that Sisulu became the movement's first full-time Secretary General. His wife, Albertina, wholeheartedly endorsed his decision and from this time the family would depend on her earnings as a nurse. The NEC decided to grant Sisulu five-pounds a month as travel expenses and Albertina — with two children in the family — agreed to pay for his monthly rail ticket.

The first June 26 National Strike in 1950 took place under his secretary generalship and marked a turning point in the radicalization of the movement based in the 1949 Programme of Action. With this Programme of Action as its guiding spirit, the ANC became more and more involved in leading the militant mass struggles of the time. Along with Dr Moroka, J.B. Marks, Dr Dadoo and Yusuf Cachalia, Sisulu was appointed to the Joint Planning Council for the "Campaign of Defiance of Unjust Laws". The campaign was launched on June 26, 1952, and in all about 8 000 people went to jail for defying apartheid laws. Sisulu himself was a member of a group of 52 Africans and Indians who entered Boksburg location without permits. He told the court, '...As long as I enjoy the confidence of my people, and as long as there is a spark of life and energy in me, I shall fight with courage and determination for the abolition of discriminatory laws and for the freedom of all South Africans irrespective of colour or creed.'

In 1952, the annual conference was held against the backdrop of the Defiance Campaign with the Volunteer-in-Chief, Nelson Mandela being placed under banning and the police looking for Sisulu.

The Working Committee of the ANC decided that Sisulu should go underground to avoid being served with an banning order before the conference. Even in conditions of legality Sisulu had to work clandestinely to prepare for conference at which he presented his report, having arrived in disguise. The conference also discussed the likelihood of the ANC being banned.

TRAVELS ABROAD

In 1953 Sisulu was invited by the World Federation of Democratic Youth (WFDY) to the Youth Festival in Rumania and travelled as a guest



Human Rights Day, 10 December 1952 — SISULU ADDRESSES A MEETING.

of honour with Duma Nokwe. Sisulu took advantage of the festival to discuss with other African delegates on the reconvening of the Pan-African Conference. He travelled to Israel, Britain, Poland, Czechoslovakia and to China on the Trans-Siberian rail. The journey to China brought him into contact with the Indonesian national movement and on his return via London he met many exiled leaders and veterans of the African Liberation Movement. Sisulu returned to South Africa in December 1953 and went to the Queenstown Conference of the ANC.

Eventually the Pan-African Conference was held in Accra in 1953 with Alfred "Hutch" Hutchinson and Ezekiel Mphahlele as ANC delegates.

BANNING AND ARREST AND MK

Sisulu was banned in 1954 and was arrested a week later for breaking the ban by attending a meeting of the NEC. He however continued working clandestinely for the movement. He was arrested under the State of Emergency and charged with Treason with wide sections of the ANC leadership.

On April 20, 1963, Sisulu went underground to join the High Command of Umkhonto We Sizwe.

On July 11, Sisulu and other leaders of Umkhonto were arrested at their Rivonia headquarters. For months they were held in solitary confinement

FOR NO REW

Allow the free flow of time honoured memory to take us back on a voyage into the protective womb of the past. Let the winds of change stop for a while as we feast our hearts upon the richness of our creation. Pause and listen to Mangaung clapping hands, listen to violin voices