

EPISCOPAL CHURCHMEN for SOUTH AFRICA

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—For A Free Southern Africa—

TOIVO JA TOIVO

3 March 1984

The sudden release on 1 March 1984 of Toivo ja Toivo, a founding member of SWAPO of Namibia and Pretoria's foremost political prisoner second only to Nelson Mandela of the South African African National Congress, has sent an earthquake shock throughout occupied Namibia and a bolt of lightning across the murky, fast-moving political-diplomatic manoeuvres in southern Africa. It is immediately apparent that the results of the freeing of ja Toivo after his 18 years in South African detention and imprisonment are not what Pretoria and its allies had so fervently and foolishly expected.

Mr ja Toivo at once dispelled any notion that his presence would split SWAPO, the inside from the outside, or produce a leadership contest within the Namibian liberation movement. He declared himself an 'obedient servant' of SWAPO prepared to do whatever he was called upon to do to further Namibian liberation. His release has re-invigorated the thrust for that liberation and proved yet once again that SWAPO - in Namibia and in diaspora - is a seamless robe.

The Multi Party Conference, Pretoria's latest attempt in an 11-year effort to set in place a counterweight to SWAPO, has suffered a blow perhaps fatal. The MPC had averred that it was instrumental in achieving ja Toivo's release. Allister Sparks writes in THE WASHINGTON POST that Mr ja Toivo scornfully dismissed the claim as a 'blatant propaganda ploy', a sentiment shared by the Namibian people who have endured decades of repression and connivance from the Pretorians and their local figurines.

Why indeed was ja Toivo freed at this time? Pretoria has for years sent into Robben Island Namibians who had made their peace with the oppressor to sound out ja Toivo and try to persuade him to join the set-up in Windhoek. Pretoria must have known that he had not broken, that, as WINDHOEK OBSERVER journalist Gwen Lister writes, ja Toivo is 'probably more strongly committed to the SWAPO cause'. Equally, the South African masters must realize that their MPC creation has no substance. Now the Americans are on the scene, busy stage-managing cease-fires and treaties and solutions and talking of 'windows of opportunity' and 'deals', with an embryo embassy in Windhoek and thereby coming close to defying Namibia's lawful authority, the United Nations - as Pretoria has been doing for decades. What is the 'deal'? What happens when Pretoria has the MPC pronounce itself an 'interim government'? What will Washington do when the South African Defence Force and the South African Police in Namibia retort in their usual manner to the ja Toivo release? People inside Namibia say with one voice that nothing has changed with Pretorian rule. And they say that United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 will not be implemented. How will the United Nations respond?

We rejoice with Toivo ja Toivo as the 59-year-old patriot enters a new phase of his life and into the active struggle for Namibia's freedom, remembering always those still in Pretoria's prisons and detention camps, mindful of Mr ja Toivo's admonition: 'We will not be free as long as our brothers and sisters are living in oppression in South Africa.'

Send your message in solidarity:

Mr Toivo ja Toivo
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NAMIBIA

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Herman Toivo ja Toivo was born on 22 August 1924 at Onayena in the north of Namibia. His mother, Ms Elizabeth ja Toivo, recalls that he was an 'obedient child'. His father died when he was 18. The young ja Toivo received his early education with a Finnish Lutheran missionary at Oshigambo. During the Second World War he joined the South African army as a railway guard, as he later said, 'when it became evident that both my country and (South Africa) were threatened by the dark clouds of Nazism'.

After the war, ja Toivo entered the Anglican Church's high school at Odibo located a scant two kilometres from the Angola border where he furthered his education and advanced his knowledge of English. He became a teacher at a church school at Onamutayi and was confirmed in 1948. In 1952, he told his mother he wanted to go to South Africa to find work: he wished to be the breadwinner for Ms ja Toivo and his six sisters and brothers. He walked across a great stretch of Namibia to catch transport. First he worked in the gold mines on the Rand then found his way to Cape Town where he was employed as a harbor policeman and as a clerk. He persisted in bettering his education through correspondence courses. His burning desire was to be a teacher.

But ja Toivo was increasingly drawn into the struggle of the Namibian people for their freedom from South African rule. He was one of the founders of what became the South West Africa People's Organization. Today SWAPO is recognized by the lawful authority over Namibia, the United Nations, as the 'sole and authentic representative of the people of Namibia'. Ja Toivo and his comrades sent a series of petitions to the UN in New York. One letter from ja Toivo reads: 'The United States, while pretending to be the protector and upholder of the rights of the oppressed peoples, show little concern for the well being of the indigenous people...She must not continue to disregard her international responsibilities because American-owned companies are extracting our copper and our vanadium by the sweat and toil of our people.' One petition was recorded on tape and smuggled out of South Africa hidden in a copy of GULLIVER'S TRAVELS. It produced a sensation when played at the world body. This brought the South African security police down on ja Toivo and he was taken under police guard in 1958 back to northern Namibia and placed under house arrest under the charge of a dependable chief.

Later ja Toivo settled in Ondangua and for years ran a store. He became a lay reader in the Anglican Church and regional secretary for SWAPO. He was arrested by South African security police in 1966 and held in detention in Pretoria and tortured along with other SWAPO officers and members. In August, 1967, 37 of them were brought to trial, charged under terms of South Africa's hastily passed Terrorism Act which had been made retroactive to June 1962. Judgment in January 1968 convicted 34 men to sentences up to life (two were acquitted; one had died in prison). Ja Toivo was given 20 years imprisonment.

Anglican Bishop of Namibia James Kauluma returned to his Windhoek home from a visit to northern Namibia late on Thursday, 1 March, 1984, the day ja Toivo was released. Next morning the bishop answered his phone and heard: 'This is Mr MacDonald from Zimbabwe.' As the bishop was puzzling, the caller broke into a laugh. It was ja Toivo. Ms ja Toivo recalls that on her rare visits to Robben Island her imprisoned son was always able to crack jokes. Toivo ja Toivo is now reunited with his 84-year-old mother and his sister Ester and with the Namibian people.

TOIVO JA TOIVO

3 March 1984

Toivo ja Toivo, a founding member of SWAPO of Namibia, was on 1 March 1984 suddenly released from imprisonment by South African officials in Windhoek, Namibia. Mr Toivo had been in South African prisons since 1966. He was detained under torture for two years, and in 1968 he and 33 other Namibians were convicted in a Pretoria court for 'terrorism', the first use of the South African Terrorism Act, which had been made retroactive in order to prosecute them. Mr Toivo has spent the past 16 years with his comrades on the Robben Island prison colony off Cape Town.

Upon his release, Mr Toivo granted an exclusive interview to Gwen Lister, political journalist for THE WINDHOEK OBSERVER. Ms Lister was a month ago charged by the South African regime with the importation, failure to declare and possession of banned documents as she passed through Johannesburg's Jan Smuts airport on her way back to Windhoek from Paris where she had covered a conference on Namibia as a guest of the United Nations. Her trial begins in a Johannesburg periurb on 7 May 1984 under terms of the Internal Security Act and other South African laws.

Her interview with Mr Toivo was received telephonically in New York today and appears in today's WINDHOEK OBSERVER. It is reprinted here with her permission and that of THE WINDHOEK OBSERVER:

Behind security fencing in an inconspicuous house in Katutura, Mr Herman Toivo ja Toivo, founder member of SWAPO and a man who has become a legend in his own right, granted me an exclusive interview only hours after his release. Surrounded by jubilant well-wishers, he told me that his incarceration of sixteen years had only served to cement his faith in the SWAPO movement, and added that in the future he would work harder for the liberation of Namibia. In fact he is probably more strongly committed to the SWAPO cause now than when he was jailed in 1968. Telephone lines both locally and abroad hummed on Thursday night with the chant "Toivo is Free, Toivo is Free", and Katutura and the whole country was charged with excitement.

Sadly, however, the words spoken by Mr ja Toivo to the judge after having been convicted in 1968 of charges under the Terrorism Act have not yet come true. In his concluding paragraph of what has become an historic speech, Mr ja Toivo said: "My co-accused and I have suffered. We are not looking forward to our imprisonment. We do not however feel that our efforts and sacrifice have been wasted. We believe that human suffering has its effect even on those who impose it. We hope that what has happened will persuade the whites of South Africa that we and the world may be right and they may be wrong. Only when white South Africans realize this and act upon it, will it be possible for us to stop our struggle for freedom and justice in the land of our birth."

With a SWAPO badge pinned to his lapel, Mr ja Toivo told me that he had not wanted to be released. "I still had four years to serve, and there are people I lead in jail," he said. His mother, Mr ja Toivo added, had agreed that he should stay on in jail with his fellow Namibians. He also agreed that there was some sort of strategy on the part of the South African government behind his release. Authorization for his release after sixteen years imprisonment was signed by the Administrator-General, Dr Willem van Niekerk.

"As far as I am concerned my mission is to liberate Namibia, but even if Namibia is free of the oppression of the South African government, and free of apartheid, we will not be free as long as our brothers and sisters are living in oppression in South Africa," said Mr ja Toivo.

His message to the people of Namibia was that they should stand together and not be shifted by either the Multi Party Conference, the South African government or the Reagan administration. Only the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 435 could lead to true independence for Namibia, he said. Mr ja Toivo spoke to me yesterday in a Katutura home, on the walls photographs of SWAPO president Sam Nujoma and the room crowded with well-wishers and SWAPO supporters delighted to welcome home a man who has become a Namibian legend. For years now there has been speculation about Mr ja Toivo and about his political future once he was released. The hopes of those people wanting to bring about a split in the SWAPO movement, in that they thought that Mr ja Toivo would challenge the leadership of Mr Nujoma, will be severely dashed. For Mr Toivo maintains that he cares nothing for position and merely wishes to work for the liberation of Namibia.

In 1968 he was sent to Robben Island for a twenty-year sentence after having been charged and convicted under the Terrorism Act. He was released on Thursday after sixteen years of imprisonment and has emerged to all intents and purposes a stronger man and a man more convinced than ever before of the justice of the SWAPO cause. His transfer from Robben Island to Windhoek came as a complete surprise. He and four other SWAPO prisoners were merely told to pack their few belongings. He was then kept in isolation throughout Tuesday night, chained with leg irons on the morning of Wednesday and taken to an airstrip on Robben Island. From there they were taken by army helicopter to the Ysterplaat military base in Cape Town and flown back to Windhoek.

In prison in Windhoek he had been called to the office of the prison commander, and there Colonel Sarel Strydom, chief of the security police, had asked him where he would go and where he would stay if released. "When you open the gates and say go, I'll find my way," was Mr ja Toivo's reply to the colonel. He had refused to tell him where he would stay if released. Another visitor he received while awaiting release in the central prison was Mr Andreas Shipanga, leader of SWAPO-D and prominent figure in the Multi Party Conference. Mr ja Toivo said he was woken on Thursday morning and told there was someone to see him. He had gone through to the office of the prison commander, and admitted that as soon as he saw it was Mr Shipanga he had turned his back. "If he is an enemy of SWAPO then he is no friend of mine," said Mr ja Toivo.

When asked by the prison authorities whom he wanted to see, he said only his mother and his sister, and his friends. Later he emphasized that by friends he meant SWAPO colleagues such as Mr Nico Bessinger and the Rev Hendrik Witbooi, SWAPO vice-president. And indeed the visit of Mr Shipanga placed Mr ja Toivo in a difficult predicament. Had he welcomed Mr Shipanga with open arms, it would have been interpreted as a conciliatory gesture to the Multi Party Conference and had he snubbed him, which he did, it would have been interpreted as a slight.

Speaking about his sixteen years on Robben Island, Mr ja Toivo said that he had passed most of the time reading. He added that there was apartheid in the prison, and prisoners were also classified by A, B, C, or D categories. Prisoners under category A, he said, had several advantages but he had refused to be classified and had remained a D prisoner which only entitled him to receive one letter a month and to write two letters a month. He could also receive one visit a month.

He confirmed that Mr Moses Katjiuongua, SWANU president, had visited him in jail. But as soon as the conversation had begun to take on a political flavor, Mr ja Toivo had dropped the subject.

Asked whether he planned to meet with SWAPO president Mr Sam Nujoma, he said simply, "It is my wish". But he added that he did not have a passport.

On Robben Island, he said, the prisoners had been put to work in the quarries and weeding in the fields. Mr Jimmy Kruger, then minister of justice and prisons, had come to see him but he had refused to speak to him, Mr ja Toivo said. Neither would he speak to his jailers or the commanding officer of the prison. Asked about conditions on Robben Island, he said they were very bad. But things had begun to improve after the International Red Cross was granted access to the prison.

In 1970, Mr ja Toivo continued, when former SWANU president Mr Gerson Vei was also on Robben Island, there had been an incident when ordinary prisoners had been beaten by the guards, and had been forced to walk with their hands and legs chained. He and others, Mr ja Toivo continued, had complained and he was placed in isolation. On May 28, said the now grey-bearded Mr ja Toivo, 28 of the prisoners including himself were beaten up. A guard had hit him, he had hit the guard back, whereafter the guard said to his friends in Afrikaans "That kaffir hit me!" Eight of them had then beaten him with their batons, Mr ja Toivo added. In another incident he had been beaten once again, and he had seriously considered laying a charge against the particular guard. However, if a charge was laid, they could make life very unpleasant, he said.

On June 2, 1971, he had been placed in isolation until 1972. And in that time he had only a Bible and an English pocket dictionary. He had spent his time reading the dictionary, he said.

Asked about the motivation of the South African government behind his release, Mr ja Toivo said that the strategy was quite obviously the Multi Party Conference, the current disengagement between Angolan and South African troops, and of course, the Americans. The latter, he said, with elections coming up in November, needed to recoup on their foreign policy failures in Lebanon and elsewhere. Now they were trying to find in this situation, he said, what he called "a winning card".

He agreed that the present initiative was not an attempt to implement Security Council Resolution 435.

Regarding medical facilities on Robben Island, he said that there had been a slight change for the better recently but still conditions were poor. The doctors in most cases, he said, did what the prison warders told them to do and only occasionally did they have a good doctor. He referred to the case of Mr Johannes Shiponeni who when arrested in 1966 was badly beaten. The other prisoners had requested treatment for him, but he had been told that he would be treated after he had been sentenced. The group had then been sent to Robben Island, where they were sent to work in a quarry. Mr Shiponeni, whose leg was giving him trouble, had fallen and injured his leg again. For two weeks nothing was done and fellow prisoners tended his leg injury. He was eventually sent to hospital and his leg had been amputated without the doctor even consulting Mr Shiponeni beforehand. The man had now been provided with an artificial leg, said Mr ja Toivo.

Dentures and spectacles were also a problem, he said, adding that if a prisoner needed reading glasses or dentures they had to pay for these articles themselves despite an agreement between the South African government and the International Red Cross. Officials also charged prisoners for glasses which were ostensibly government issue

and supposed to be free of charge, said Mr ja Toivo, adding that the prisoners had been certain that there was some sort of corruption on the go.

Then, after sixteen long years, on Tuesday night, he had been told to pack his belongings. "I didn't know where I was going", said Mr ja Toivo. But the next day it was back to Namibia.

"We will remain one SWAPO," said Mr ja Toivo, and referring to the question of leadership he said that the SWAPO movement was a big family. "It does not matter who is leading. I am not concerned with position."

At this point Mr Nico Bessinger, secretary for foreign affairs, added that the leaders within SWAPO did not see themselves as leaders of the nation, but rather as servants of the people.

His mission, concluded the man who after such a long period of incarceration is not bitter at all, was to liberate Namibia and later look to their oppressed friends across the Orange River in South Africa.
