Foe of Apartheid
Albert John Luthuli

Only a handful of the 2,500,000 whites in the Union of South Africa have ever met a 61-year-old African chief named Albert John Luthuli. He has never been asked to speak on the Government radio. His picture rarely appears in the white press and then only when he is in some sort of trouble over the governing Nationalist party's News policy of strict segregation, or apartheid. His winning of the Nobel Peace Prize for 1960--he learned of it yesterday while cutting cane on his farm in Natal--is hardly likely to end the isolation that the Afrikaners have imposed on him. Since 1958 he has been forbidden to engage in political activity. He has been denied freedom of movement outside his native village of Groutville, in the Umvoti Mission Reserve. Because so few of the Afrikaners—the predominant Afrikaans-speaking whites—have heard Chief Luthuli speak, there is a tendency among them to regard him as a dangerous extremist. He was among the 153 men and women of all races accused of treason in 1956. But the Government was never able to formulate a satisfactory indictment against him. After the preliminary inquiry had dragged on for twelve months, Chief Luthuli and sixty others were freed, and the Government later abandoned the case.

Opposed to Violence
Actually he is a moderate. Chief Luthuli hates violence and regards extreme nationalism as a greater danger than communism. He calls himself a socialist of the British variety.

Those who have met him say their first impression was that he seemed to be a typical Zulu chief, simple, courteous, rather wooden and platitudinous in speech. He has a square, rugged face and talks slowly, gesturing with his large hands. He speaks English with a distinct American intonation, picked up at schools run by American missionaries. He was never anti-white and he has never resorted to force.

As president general of the African National Congress, Chief Luthuli was intimately involved in the defiance campaign that swept South Africa in 1952. He helped organize demonstrations of the sit-in type against the segregation laws. Thousands of Africans invaded libraries reserved for whites, sat on railway seats “for Europeans only” and in other ways invited arrest.

The Government was well organized and led. Startled that the Africans could behave with such discipline and courage, the Government crushed the movement with sharply repressive measures.

In September, 1952, Chief Luthuli was summoned to the Native Affairs Department in Pretoria and handed an ultimatum: he must resign from the African Nationalist Congress and the defiance campaign or give up his chiefship.

Chief Luthuli replied politely that a chief, by Zulu tradition, is first the leader of his people and only secondly a government official. The Government, thereupon dismissed him. The tribal elders were so impressed by his refusal that no successor to Chief Luthuli was ever named.

Summing up his political life, Chief Luthuli once wrote: “Who will deny that thirty years of my life have been spent knocking in vain, patiently, moderately and modestly at a closed and barred door?”

Chief Luthuli entered the resistance campaign an obscure country chief; he emerged a public figure. The Government tried to stifle him by forbidding him to leave his home district. Chief Luthuli tried to run congress affairs from his ramshackle house in Groutville, sending out long messages laced with Biblical cadences.

The new Nobel Prize winner was a son of an African Christian missionary who went from South Africa to Rhodesia in the service of the American Congregationalist Church. He was educated at Adams College, an American missionary institution near Durban, and later taught there before being elected a tribal chief. He made a lecture tour of the United States in 1948.

Last year, in protest against the Sharpeville massacre of African demonstrators, Chief Luthuli publicly burned his pass book—hated symbol of racial segregation.

Chief Luthuli and his wife have two sons and three daughters.