

Walter Sisulu visiting Robben Island, where he was held prisoner—along with Nelson Mandela—for many years.



PHOTO: GEORGE HOUSER

REMEMBERING WALTER SISULU

BY GEORGE HOUSER

It was more than fifty years ago, in 1952, prompted by my friend Bill Sutherland, that I wrote a letter on the stationery of the Congress of Racial Equality to Walter Sisulu, then the fairly new Secretary General of the African National Congress, asking if we could do anything to support their nonviolent Defiance Campaign against the apartheid laws of South Africa. His response was immediate and enthusiastic, inviting us to help with publicity and fundraising for family relief of those arrested and for legal defense. Thus was born Americans for South African Resistance and following it, the American Committee On Africa. And a change took place in my own life.

I did not meet Walter personally until 1954, on my first trip to Africa. I visited him at his home in Orlando West, now part of Soweto—the same home he returned to in 1989 when he was released from life imprisonment in Robben Island. Then for thirty-seven years I was prohibited from entering South Africa, while Walter spent so many of those years in prison. Not until the early 1990s were we able to meet with each other again in South Africa, and later when he came to the United States. One of the high points in my life came when Walter invited me and my colleague, Herbert Shore, now in California, to work with him on his memoirs. This was to be an oral history of his life as Walter would relate it. For six weeks Herb and I met with Walter Sisulu in 1995 and '97 as, in conversation with us, he traced his life from birth through his release from Robben Island. One cannot learn everything about a man through taped discussions, but during the process, as his life unfolded before us, our high respect and esteem for him not only increased, but we grew to love him. I wonder, if in a shorthand way, it is possible to convey something of the greatness of this man.

COMMITMENT TO THE LIBERATION CAUSE

From the time he became the Secretary General of the ANC in 1949, there was not an event of major importance in the South African struggle in which Walter was not involved from the planning to the execution. He was arrested on the first day of the non-violent Defiance Campaign, June 26, 1952, for refusing to carry and show his pass. He was a principal organizer of the Congress of the People and the formulation of the Freedom Charter of 1955. He was among the 156 leaders arrested on the charge of treason in the infamous Treason Trials of 1956 to '61. He burned his pass in defiance of the apartheid government after the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. And he was one of those accused for sabotage, and received a life sentence, in the notorious Rivonia trial of 1963-'64. It was impossible to count up the number of times he had been arrested. He knew that in 1962 alone it was six times. He worked as Secretary General for the munificent sum of five pounds a month. When the ANC voted to raise this

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to ten pounds, the president at that time, Dr. Xuma, said "How can you raise it to ten, when you haven't been able to provide the five?" It was Albertina, his life partner, who was the provider, he unashamedly pointed out.

At the wedding of Albertina and Walter in 1944, Anton Lembede, in a speech at the reception addressing himself to Albertina, said: "You know you are marrying an already married man. He is married to the nation." Walter told us with a smile that later Albertina said to him privately, "Now I don't want you to take advantage of what Lembede said!"

Walter seemed to have an ingrained sense of indignation toward any kind of injustice well before he joined the ANC in 1940. When he was distributing leaflets on a Johannesburg train one day for the *Bantu World*, he noted a young girl crying as the ticket examiner was forcefully taking her ticket away from her. Walter interrupted the confrontation, and the examiner struck Walter for interfering. They struggled briefly. The police were called and Walter ended up for the first of many times in the Johannesburg Central Prison, called The Fort. On another occasion when he worked briefly for Premier Biscuits in the 1930s, Walter organized a strike by the other workers, campaigning for an increase of wages from eighteen and a half shillings to twenty-one shillings a week. The white owner, on the day of the strike, threatened all of the 200 workers to get back on the job. "Hey, boy, you want to work? Go back," he demanded. All went except Walter. He was dismayed, but said to the workers, "Go back without their conceding to our demands? I can't do that." And so he lost another job. He lost many jobs this way because he was unafraid to stand up to his employers.

SENSE OF HUMOR

Walter enjoyed telling stories about his own foibles, a way of laughing at himself. When he was traveling on the Trans-Siberian Railroad on the way from Russia to China in 1953, he went looking for his companion on the journey, Duma Nokwe, and found him in one of the cars with two Russian generals, showing the effects of having too many drinks. Walter himself never indulged in alcoholic drinks. He adamantly refused the drinks that the generals tried to insist he take. "They thought I was a reactionary because I would not drink," Walter said to us in an impish way. And in China on this same journey, Walter laughed as he told us, somewhat apologetically, that he disliked Chinese food. At mealtime he often embarrassed Duma by asking for English food. Again Walter said to us, "They thought I was reactionary." (Not really of course, since the purpose of this journey abroad, taken clandestinely without passport or the knowledge of the SA government, was to seek allies and to prepare for the bitter struggle which lay ahead.)

He laughingly told us about his one experience in gambling when he worked as a young fellow in the mines. Only a teenager, he was enticed by one he called a "trickster/gambler" to guess which bottle top had a pea under it. If you guessed right, you would win the bet. If not, you lost. That Sunday afternoon Walter lost his watch, his hat and all the money he had—fifteen shillings. He never gambled again.

He told us, in a rather light-hearted way, about one of his arrests in 1962. In the company of an ANC colleague, he was carrying a package that had just come from their comrades in Dar es Salaam—a history of the organization, banned literature. As they were walking along a Johannesburg street, they saw a member of the Special Branch approaching. So Walter, carrying the package under his arm, quietly dropped it on the street. And just as the plainclothes policeman confronted them, a nearby merchant, having seen the package drop and thinking he was doing an act of kindness, returned the package to Walter. The police confiscated it, and Walter was sent to jail again.

HUMILITY

As noted by Nelson Mandela and many others, Walter Sisulu was the behind-the-scenes organizer in the struggle, not necessarily the front man. He did not seek the limelight for himself. We asked him if he ever felt any envy toward Mandela. He dismissed the idea completely. "Mandela was the man. I recognized this when we first met in my office in 1941. If he had not come back after we first met, I would have gone looking for him." Walter was elected Secretary General of the ANC at the 1949 convention of the ANC. We asked him if he voted for himself. "No," he answered, "I did not vote for myself. Generally that would be my attitude, not to vote to win." He actually won the election by only one vote.

He wanted always to be one of the people. After he was released from Robben Island with all the publicity, the fanfare, and the adoration of the people, why did he not move from his humble home in Soweto to more spacious living quarters, we wanted to know. "Because I have a sentimental attachment to this house," he said. "It is in this house I planned many things. . . and had many discussions. It would mean moving away from where I am."

I wonder if Walter was really conscious of his celebrity status. I had the experience of walking down a street of Johannesburg with him as we were consulting on his memoirs. We couldn't walk a few steps without people on the sidewalk, some crossing the busy street, stopping him to embrace him, shake hands, greet him affectionately. When we walked in Soweto near the Hector Peterson monument (to the high school student who was the first one killed in the Soweto Uprising of



Walter Sisulu,
George Houser,
and Albertina
Sisulu.

1976) not far from his home, it was as if he were the pied piper—children flocked behind us. One young girl (perhaps nine or ten years old) approached him, he embraced her, and then she invited him to her birthday party in a few days. He said he would go, and he did. When we visited the old Rivonia house where he and the others had been arrested more than thirty years before, in 1963, we found a white family now owned the property. The woman of the house was so excited by his presence that she insisted on having her picture taken with Walter—but not before she got all dressed up with painted nails and her Sunday best. I took the picture myself. The white man who lived next door heard that Sisulu was there and fetched his grandchild so that his picture could also be taken with the famous former freedom fighter, who years before might well have been called a “terrorist.”

What a contrast this was with the humble origins of this man who never had more than a standard four-year education, had worked in the mines, and had been arrested so many times he lost count. Walter had a white father. He was light in color. We asked him if he carried a pass. He answered: “Yes, I used to carry a pass. There was the question of a Coloured man carrying a pass. I never took advantage of this because I never wanted to see my color determine my race. I was an African in every sense of the word. No less, no more. I carried a pass like any other African. My inspiration was my mother and the people... The point I don’t want to run away from, you see, is that I’m part of the system until I have defeated it.”

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAN

Walter Sisulu was a positive-thinking man. He was an optimist. In our discussions with him, the names of many figures prominent in the South African struggle came up. Almost without exception, he had something positive to say. This was easy in any reference to such strong comrades and allies as Nelson Mandela or Oliver Tambo. But what about Robert Sobukwe,

the leader of the Pan Africanist Congress that broke away from the ANC? “He was a man of integrity,” he said. “There was no opportunism about him. I think when he opted for nationalism, he was genuine ...a man of integrity.” He always tried to find something to praise in others.

And he was a man without bitterness. He believed in reconciliation. We asked him if he held any grudges, wanted to get even with anyone for all he and his family had suffered over the decades. “I’ve no bitterness,” he said. “Bitterness would be in conflict with the whole policy to which I have dedicated my life. Bitterness would result in trying to mobilize people for revenge. So bitterness has no room in me.”

Walter loved music, especially choral music. And he had a fine singing voice. At one point in his younger days, he was chairman of the Orlando Musical Association; it even performed on South Africa Broadcasting. So it didn’t come as complete surprise when we asked him what he was thinking at the time of sentencing in the Rivonia trial when he, Mandela, Govan Mbeki, and the others thought they would be given the death penalty. He personally was convinced of it, and he and Mandela had agreed that they would not seek an appeal from such a decision. He said to us: “I was thinking how I must go to the gallows. And I thought I must go singing—for the sake of the youth who follow us, so they will know that we went without fear and that we had fulfilled our task in life. We must show that our deaths would not mark the end, but would be an inspiration to our people.”

And so we called Walter Sisulu’s memoirs *I Will Go Singing*. ■

George M. Houser, WWII draft resister, former youth secretary of FOR, participant in the Journey of Reconciliation, and co-founder of the Congress on Racial Equality and the American Committee on Africa, is also the biographer of Walter Sisulu. This memorial was presented at Canaan Baptist Church, May 22, 2003.