

Note prepared by Davis Givira, 1984

A speech delivered by Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe in September, 1948, on the occasion of the completors' social held at the College dining hall. He had been chosen by the students who would be remaining at Fort Hare in the following years.

Mr M.C., members of the Staff, Sons and Daughters of Africa, yours is a very fortunate position indeed. And we envy you. But ours is not the common envy of petty shopkeepers or men who are failures in life; it is like the noble envy of soldiers who are constrained to remain in camp, and endure the drudgery of training while their fellow cadets are being rushed off to the battle-front.

It has pleased God that you should leave what I shall refer to as the Lotus land of Fort Hare at a time when conditions in your country are as tempestuous as they are today; at a time when your people, driven on by the greatest urge all people, at all time, have ever, and will ever know - ^{see page 2.} *the urge of self-preservation, have decided to stand together as one man, rally around one banner, and dare the monster, "oppression", force it back relentlessly to the wall, ^{and} batter it until it pleads for mercy; at a time when the Government of this country is now in the hands of a few ruthless and unscrupulous men who profess to be the champions and defenders of what ^{they} wrongly refer to as "white civilisation", a civilisation from which they themselves fled during the 1834-1838 Great Trek;

It has pleased God I say, that you should leave Fort Hare at such a time. But what for?

That you should totter and cringe in front of your oppressors who claim to be leading you in the name of 'Christian Trusteeship'? Children yet unborn will point a finger of scorn at you, and will curse your name long after your voices have died on the horizon.

That you should accept these evils with Christian-like fortitude because they are, so to speak, the entrance examination into heaven? The whole realm of nature will tremble and shake at this blasphemy, and the very earth which gave you birth, will disown you.

Your starting point in your struggle for our liberation is non-collaboration, and the boycott of dummy institutions is the first step on the ladder of non-collaboration.

"What you are thunders so loudly, that what you say cannot be heard". You cannot be a leader and a collaborator: you are either the one or the other, and no matter what you say, your actions will betray you.

True leadership demands complete subjugation of self, absolute honesty, integrity and uprightness of character, courage and fearlessness, and above all, a consuming love for one's people.

Go and demonstrate to your people that imprisonment in South Africa is no disgrace at all, and that to be arrested and charged 'as a dangerous political criminal' is the highest honour that the Government of this country can ever bestow upon you.

and significance
(+* the urge that has given meaning to the seemingly haphazard actions of history - the urge of self-preservation - have decided to stand together as one man.....)

Benji, this is part of the speech that was delivered by Robert in a ~~xxxxi~~ social traditionally held to bid farewell to those students who had completed their studies. Unfortunately I cannot trace the entire speech. I merely taxed my memory to recall a bout two-thirds of it. Some of our colleagues, possibly Godfrey, should have it.

This, in my view, is one of the greatest speeches - if not the greatest - ever made by Robert. I like it because it is the speech that stamped him as an orator of no mean repute. From then onwards, he was always called upon to make speeches, and no meeting - political, cultural, social or even a mass meeting of students - would be regarded as having ended until and unless Robert (or "Bloss" as he was affectionately called by his intimate friends) had spoken.

Note the prophetic ring in his utterances : "imprisonment in S.A., the demands of true leadership : integrity and uprightness of character, courage and fearlessness, complete subjugation of self, love for one's people....." These beautiful and outstanding character traits are all Robert's. He displayed them well during his short stay with us. ~~His~~ His was indeed a crowded hour of glorious life, as the poet says.

To those who knew Robert, the speech was that of their hero rising to the occasion, as expected. But to those who came into contact with him for the first time at Fort Hare, the remarkable oratory of this man, his eloquence, his command of the language - these were indeed well taken. "Some of you chaps should go overseas and train for oratory...." was the appreciative comment of the late Prof. Z K Matthews who congregated on the verandah just after the speech. From, then onwards, he set the tone in all meetings. "I always learn something after listening to Mr Sobukwe" was the comment of our English Professor ~~XXXXX~~ Prof. D Stuart after Robert had ~~spoken~~ made some apt comments on the Professor's lecture on Journalism.

One amusing repercussion that flowed from the speech by Robert was that a group of Afrikaaner lecturers took offence at Robert's observation that their people ran away from civilization during the Great Trek. They threatened to resign if Robert was not called upon to retract the statement. There was no reaction from the authorities, and the lecturers did not resign.

By a resolution of the A.N.C. Youth League, of which Robert was a chairman and one of its founding members, the Speech was made "document of the organisation" which

could be used, and ~~to~~ which members could refer when necessary.

Another amusing incident happened after Robert had delivered his first speech at Fort Hare, during a "Freshers' Social" at Wesley House, "the only House in the Victoria East, amidst Hostels (Iona) and Halls (Beda)!

In his speech, representing the new students, Robert made the provocative observation that, because of the stupidity of some of our graduate seniors, the abbreviation B.A. for Bachelor of Arts, has come to be taken to mean "Blinking Asses"!

The "Senior and Saner" students, as they referred to themselves, felt insulted and hurriedly convened a House Meeting in which Robert was accused of having insulted the seniors. He was "tried", and asked to recant. He refused, and was then sentenced to sleep in the bathroom for one week.

"We freshers rallied to Robert's^p defence, and complained to the warden, the Rev. L. Cragg. He refused to interfere. We thereupon approached the Superintendent of the Victoria Hospital where Robert had once been a patient. He immediately contacted the Warden and told ^{him} this confinement in a damp bathroom would be detrimental to his health, as he had once been a T.B. patient ^{at} the Victoria Hospital. He was immediately taken out."

Robert was of course an excellent tennis player who represented Eastern Province with his brother Charles on more than one occasion. He was also a good rugby player, although he played full back only in hostel matches. It is obvious that it was in admiration of his Brother Charles' full back play that he also decided to play in the same position. Charles was a better player, having been a regular full back at Healdtown.

And when Wesley House pitted its rugby prowess against either Iona Hostel or Beda Hall, Robert would be among the most vociferous cheering Wesley supporters. And to reward him for his effort Wesley invariably won all its matches because then, it was the strongest house in the Rugby competition.

Robert made friends easily. He loved people, and he was in turn loved by them. Among his intimate friends at Healdtown, was McVicar Zani. They were both voracious readers of fiction and would always be seen engrossed in the novels of Baroness Orczy and her Scarlet Pimpernel. Robert also relish "The Saint" detective stories.

Another intimate friend of his was Caleb Mokhesi, now Dr Mokhesi in the Reef, Mr Berry Pukwana, a Department Secretary in Transkei, and Mr Present N.Tshaka a Maths lecturer at Unitra. Indeed Robert made friends easily, and on his death, he could boast countless intimate friends who held him in high esteem."

Look, Benjy; there is a friend of mine, Ebrahim S.Patel who is a lawyer in Johannesburg. He is the President of the non-racial S.A.Rugby Union. They met in Kimberley. He was just so excited when he described to me his first meeting with

Robert in Kimberley. He was enthusiastic in his praise of Robert's obvious brilliance - "a gentleman whose every reply or comment on your statement is obviously well thought-out". I think it would be profitable to let him give you his impression of Robert. He is on the telephone directory, and he lives in Bosmont.

Kind regards and best wishes.

Yours sincerely

Dennis
Dennis D. Siwisa.

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Robert Sobukwe Papers

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