

The Passing of a Giant: Walter Sisulu, 1912 - 2003

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Growing up as teenagers in the 1950s and the beginning of the 60s was for many of us an infinitely seductive and unstintingly exhilarating experience, because Africa was confidently shaking off the burden of colonialism and was on the march to great expectations. The pulsating pace of the march was irresistibly euphoric, and reading the *Evening News* in the late afternoons with Oko Addy became a most compelling addiction. The era brought us a pantheon of political and nationalist icons from far beyond the borders of Ghana. We came to know, by reputation or sight, Lumumba, Awolowo, Azikiwe, Nkomo, Kaunda, Banda, Kenyatta, Nyerere, Keita, Toure, Du Bois, Padmore and many others. Since that period there has been a steady ebb in the flow of “true sons or daughters of the soil” and veritable giants in the African political firmament. By the 1970s and 1980s, the scoundrels and butchers were tipping the scales, with the Nguemas, Amins, Bongos and Bokassas of this world hugging the footlights in the African political drama.

Very recently, on 5 May 2003, one of the real giants, of heroic proportions, passed on, and Africa went into mourning in a fashion we have not seen since the death of Julius Nyerere. Walter Sisulu passed away in the early evening, at his home in Linden, Johannesburg, in the arms of his devoted wife Albertina Sisulu who had, in the trying 26 years of her husband’s imprisonment, maintained a sober and rock-like fidelity to his life and cause. By her account, he died peacefully, at rest with himself and his conscience. Sisulu in death was celebrated in an unforgettable way. African tradition demands that no foul words or unpleasant judgement may be made on recently dead people. People are therefore often verbally kind and generous to figures they would normally be more critical about. But Sisulu’s case was definitely and doubtlessly different. It went far beyond customary politeness and decorum. The display of public affection and respect was penetrating, artless and perceptibly heartfelt.

Sisulu was born on 18 May 1912 (the year the ANC was founded) in Engcobo district in the Transkei. His mother, Alice, was a domestic worker and his father a white civil servant called Victor Dickinson. He grew up exclusively in his mother’s care and got as far as Standard 4 at the age of 15, when he had to drop out of school. We are informed that in 1923,

Walter was exposed to a distorted version of Garvey’s philosophy by one Wellington Buthelezi, who arrived in Qutubeni, Engcobo district with his

lieutenant, Reverend Twala, in the early 1920s. Buthelezi was a Zulu from Natal, but in Engcobo District he posed as a black American who had graduated from Oxford and Cambridge. He and Twala held public meetings at which, Sisulu recalled, "They talked about freedom for the black man and condemned the whites for their injustice and repression." Buthelezi preached that an American all-Negro contingent were coming in aeroplanes to liberate them. There was enormous excitement in the village. "Although we knew very little about oppression, it was a welcome idea that black people who had got power were coming. Soon afterwards an aeroplane did fly over the village and Walter was convinced that the American liberators had arrived."¹ Buthelezi's millenarian Garveyism proved to be the pipe dream it was. It was a measure of Walter's character that he was not disappointed and shattered when no crusaders came on the noble mission. Rather, the tale planted a seed of hope in his mind: "One day we shall be free".²

In 1928, he left Qutubeni village in Engcobo for Johannesburg. Off he went on the *MBombela*, the train which ferried miners between the Transkei and Johannesburg. Elinor Sisulu writes that the train was used "exclusively for transporting recruits from the rural areas of the mines On its journey of about 1000 kilometres, it would stop at countless small country sidings to load the human cargo destined for the mines."³ In those days, in the words of Alan Paton in *Cry the Beloved Country* (a book we read at Achimota school), "all roads led to Jo'burg". Johannesburg and the Reef area in general acted like a magnet attracting migrant and prospective migrant labourers from the whole Southern African region. So strong and pervasive was the economic institution of migrant labour that in one of Isaac Schapera's studies on the Batswana he suggested that it became almost a *rite de passage* for young African males. This, indeed, was true not only for the Batswana, but for Africans in the whole region.

Walter Sisulu went to Johannesburg as a prospective labourer and became a mine-worker living in a barrack in the Reef compounds (Rose Deep Mine, Germiston). He moved from this soul-crushing position to a less arduous but equally lowly job as a "kitchen boy" in East London. Sisulu was influenced and inspired by Clements Kadalie of the Industrial Commercial Union in East London. He returned to Johannesburg, not too long after that, to work in a bakery.⁴ It was at this point, back in Johannesburg, that he became increasingly involved in trade union work, and was soon to lead a group of workers in strike action for better wages. The strike was crushed and he got sacked for his pains. After this he went through a series of factory jobs, clashing frequently with his white bosses.⁵ While moving from one form of drudgery to the next, he was also studying for his as yet incomplete school certificate. Thus, between 1928 and 1940 Sisulu acquired enormous experience as a conscious member of the African working class of South Africa, in the decisive inter-war years. He had worked in a range of jobs: as a delivery man for a dairy; in the masonry and carpentry department, then as a miner at the Rose Deep Mine; as a domestic; as a baker for Premier Biscuits; as a paint mixer for Herbert Evans in Johannesburg; as a packer for a tobacconist; as a part-time teller at the Union Bank of South Africa, and after 1938 as an advertising salesperson and real-estate agent.

He joined the African National Congress (ANC) in 1940, and came under the influence of Dr A.B. Xuma. That same year, Dr Xuma, also from Engcobo, became president of the organization. From 1940 onwards the focus of his life became uncompromisingly political. Critical of what they considered to be the old and inadequately combative political leadership of the ANC, in 1944, together with others like Anton Lembede, A.P. Mda, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Jordan Ngubane, Congress Mbatha, and Willie Nkomo, they formed the Youth League within the Congress. In the foreword to the biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu, *In Our Lifetime*, Nelson Mandela writes that, "his home was the meeting place for that generation of young men whose fierce debates and arguments provided important impetus to the birth of the ANC Youth League. Walter was central to that circle: he was the magnet that drew us all together".⁶ In 1949, the Youth League was instrumental in voting the politically over-placatory Xuma out and replacing him with J.S. Moroka. Sisulu was elected first full-time Secretary-General of the ANC. This was an acknowledgement of his organizational skills. Ruth First recalled that,

This is the period when Walter Sisulu, night and day, became the centre of the organizational drive of the ANC. And this is the start of a new history in the life struggle of the ANC. And from this time on, largely under the leadership of Sisulu, though not exclusively, we have an ANC in direct and continuing contact with the masses, leading political strikes and mass disobedience campaigns. We have the reconstitution of the ANC with a system of branch and cell organizations which prepared it for the period when the ANC was forced underground and we have a policy of unity in action in the ANC ... which policy was in fact initiated in this period under the secretaryship of Walter Sisulu.⁷

Three years later, in 1952, dissatisfied with Moroka, the Youth League helped to elect Chief Albert Luthuli to the presidency. That year, 1952, Sisulu was the main creative force behind the Defiance Campaign. Together with Nanabhai (Nana Sita), president of the Natal Indian Congress, he led the first group of Africans, Coloureds and Indians in breaking the Pass Laws, by marching into Boksburg Location without the requisite permit.

By the early 1940s, Walter Sisulu had become an estate agent. In the words of his biographer, his agency, Sitha Investments, "was a hive of activity". When Mandela came to Johannesburg in 1941 Sisulu became his mentor. In his own words, Mandela expressed his fascination with Walter Sisulu's set-up.

This was 1941 and I had never seen a black man in an office, let alone running an estate agency. I did not even know what an estate agency was. I later asked my cousin what degree Sisulu had. Garlick thought he had only passed Standard Six. I found this difficult to believe, but it was confirmed by someone else. "But how can this be?", I asked. "With such fluency in English and with such offices?" The reply was that, "he has knowledge and skills from the University of life and Johannesburg is a good place to learn".⁸

It was, indeed, Sisulu who inducted both Govan Mbeki and Nelson Mandela into the ANC.

At the funeral of Sisulu, Archbishop Desmond Tutu made, in his inimitable style, the observation, in jest, that if he had been Sisulu he would have put into his CV the fact that he had inducted Nelson Mandela into the ANC. Mandela stayed for some months at the Sisulu house. Mandela's acknowledgement of Sisulu has been consistent. He has pointed out that, at that point in history,

more and more I had come under the wise tutelage of Walter Sisulu. Walter was strong, reasonable, practical and dedicated. He never lost his head in a crisis; he was often silent when others were shouting. He believed that the African National Congress was the means to effect change in South Africa, the repository of black hopes and aspirations. Sometimes one can judge an organization by the people who belong to it, and I knew that I would be proud to belong to any organization of which Walter was a member. I didn't know the name of the ANC until I was at Fort Hare, but even then I did not identify myself with the ANC until Comrade Walter recruited me. I tended to follow what he was doing because he was a man who made a tremendous impression on my thinking. He recruited me to the Youth League and I automatically became a member of the ANC.⁹

One of the striking and consistent facts about Sisulu, which in the wake of his death most of the people who had known him were quick to point out, was the fact that he had the rare quality of holding people together and leading without overtly demonstrating his leadership. His natural diplomatic qualities enabled him to mediate and hold together, in a collective, people with fairly divergent philosophical positions. What impressed a lot of his comrades was that he never expected others to do things he was not himself prepared to do. Walter Sisulu displayed a gently expressed but unwavering humanity, which radiated distinctly in his social life. He placed himself always at the bidding of the collective and was generally more concerned about the welfare and lot of others than about his own.

After serving on the Joint Planning Council for the Defiance Campaign, and leading one of the first batches of passive resisters when the campaign began in 1952, Sisulu was jailed briefly as a resister. He was arrested and tried again with other leaders of the campaign in late 1952, and sentenced to nine months' imprisonment, suspended for three years. In 1953, he travelled to Europe, Russia and China. He was the guest of the World Federation of Democratic Youth at its third World Youth Festival in Bucharest, Rumania. Included in the delegation of South Africans were several who had fled the country. They included Duma Nokwe, Alfred Hutchinson, Henry "Squire" Makgothi, Paul Joseph and others.

From 1956 to 1961 Sisulu was a defendant in the Treason Trial. For the duration of the 1960 State of Emergency, he was detained without trial. The next year he faced prosecution twice. He was arrested six times in 1962 and placed under 12-hour house arrest on 26 October and under 24-hour house arrest on 3 April 1963. On 11 July 1963, Walter Sisulu was arrested and detained under the 90-day law. Convicted in 1963 of furthering the aims of the banned ANC and of helping to organize the May 1961 stay-at-home, Sisulu was sentenced to six years in jail. He was released on bail and placed under 24-hour house arrest. Pending an appeal against a six-year sentence, Sisulu forfeited bail of R6000, disappeared from his home

on 19 April 1963, and went underground. The next time South Africans heard from Walter was when he spoke on the underground ANC station *Radio Freedom* on 26 June 1963, telling the people of South Africa that *Umkhonto we Sizwe* had decided to fight the Apartheid regime on an "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" basis.

As one of those arrested during the Rivonia Raid, Sisulu was sentenced to life imprisonment. At the Rivonia Trial, he was the main defence witness and was subjected to fierce attack from the testy prosecutor, Percy Yutar. Sisulu told him: "I wish you were an African. Then you would know...." Released in October 1989, Sisulu was a member of the Internal Leadership Core and was elected ANC Deputy President at the national conference in July 1991.

My first detailed and substantial briefing on Walter Sisulu was given to me by Joe Matlou, in late May 1976, in Lusaka, Zambia, shortly before the Soweto Uprising. At that point in time, the Africanists within the ANC, including people like A.K. Mqota, Joe Matlou, Tennyson Makiwane, Ambrose Makiwane and others, were expressing forcefully their rejection of the South African Communist Party influence on the ANC. Matlou told me in glowing terms how crucial Walter Sisulu's role was to the struggle of the ANC. As he spoke about Walter Sisulu his voice descended into an admiring sotto mode. He went on at great length about the history of Sisulu and was of the view that if there was any person who would bridge the growing gap and tension between the Africanists and the non-Africanists within the ANC, it was Walter Sisulu. This registered firmly in my mind.

Years later, not too long after Mandela was released, indeed on the occasion of Mandela's first visit to the Transkei, I was myself *en route* from Nairobi to Windhoek, and was changing flights at Johannesburg International Airport. I was in the international lounge when Walter and Albertina Sisulu walked in. In those days the Transkei and other Bantustans were ostensibly treated by the apartheid regime as independent states. Therefore, passengers for the Transkei passed through the international lounge. When the Sisulus walked in with their bodyguard, I was the only African in the lounge and as soon as they were seated at one of the tables I walked over to the table, greeted them and sat down rather excitedly. After initial courtesies, I launched into a probing conversation with Walter Sisulu on the future. What came across very distinctly to me was the air of fearlessness which hung around him. He was a thoroughly relaxed person, but in his eyes one could read the qualities of a totally courageous person who was in complete command of his ambience. There was also a distinct charm in his soft and gentle style. These qualities were, in a way, in sharp contrast with his diminutive figure. Not too long afterwards, Winnie and Nelson Mandela also came in with their bodyguards. Walter Sisulu left a marked impression on my mind, which has been consolidated over the last decade.

He displayed none of the triumphalism which lesser-calibre politicians were sometimes inclined to succumb to with the collapse of Apartheid. With quiet self-confidence he pursued his political bent, forging the sort of broad racial and cultural unity necessary to defeat the structure and legacy of Apartheid. Even when the odious system had been defeated, he sought no high profile office, but was rather content to stay in the background of post-Apartheid politics. With his passing, one of the last titans of the anti-colonial struggle on this continent has gone into history. He will never be forgotten.

Notes

1. Elinor Sisulu. *Walter & Albertina: In Our Lifetime*. David Philip Publishers. Cape Town, 2002, p. 30.
2. Pippa Green. Free at Last: Joy after 30 Years of Pain. *Independent News and Media*. South Africa, May 2003, p. 4.
3. Elinor Sisulu, op. cit., p. 40.
4. Rapule Tabane. The Gentle Voice of Moderation. *Mail and Guardian*, 9–15 May 2003, p. 7.
5. Elinor Sisulu, op. cit., p. 2.
6. Ibid., p. 6.
7. Ruth First. Speech: Walter Sisulu's 70th Birthday, 1982. Quoted from Elinor Sisulu, op. cit., p. 82.
8. Nelson Mandela. Interview, 11 August 1993. Ibid., p. 65.
9. Ibid., p. 68.