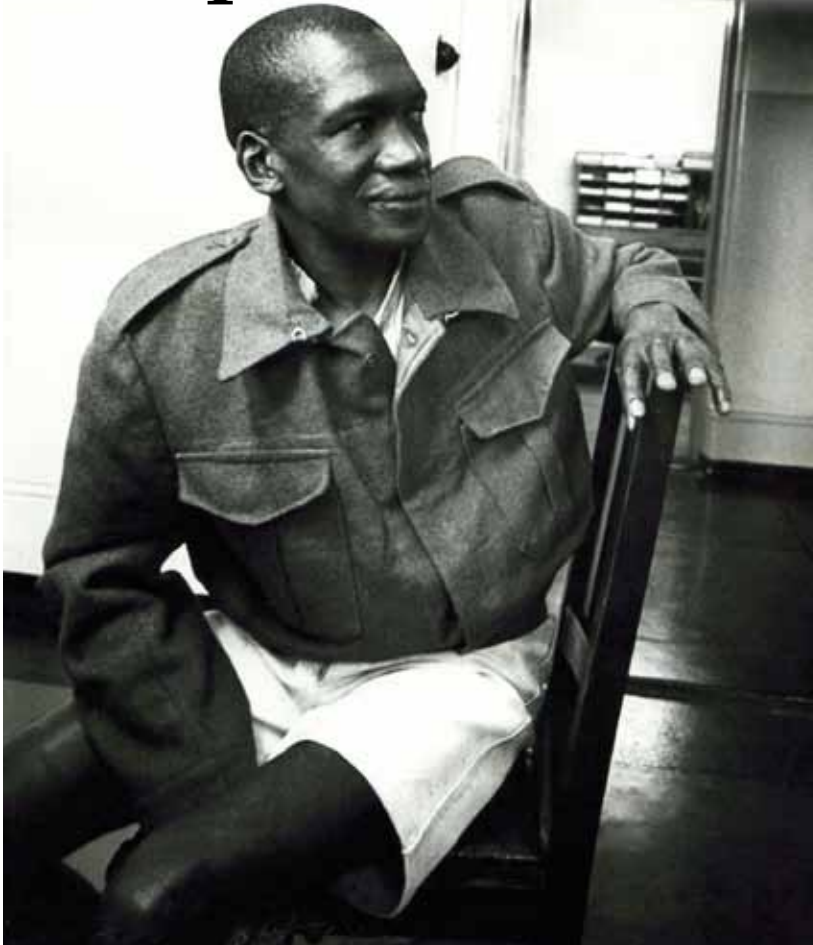


**ROBERT SOBUKWE**

# How Wits and the Department of Justice Shaped his Life

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History shows that a cosy relationship between the leadership of universities and the Apartheid regime not only existed, but directly impacted the lives and academic careers of freedom fighters, like Robert Sobukwe.

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By Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu

This article focuses on cordial relationships that existed between the leadership of institutions of higher education and the Apartheid regime. An example proving that this leadership was guilty in aiding the Apartheid regime to achieve its hideous goals is reflected in a 5 May 1969 letter on the pending release of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) leader. This letter, to be discussed later, was authored by GR Bozzoli, then Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). It was addressed to then Minister of Justice, Petrus Cornelius Pelser, who had publicly announced the release of Sobukwe. The letter also serves as an important historical document that provides primary evidence concerning the cosy relationship that existed between universities and the Apartheid regime.

Robert Sobukwe was born on 5 December 1924 in Graaff-Reinet, Northern Cape Province. He attended mission school at Healdtown and the University of Fort Hare where he became President of the Students' Representative Council, Editor of the students' magazine *Inkundla Ya Bantu* and Chairperson of the Fort Hare's branch of the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL). He was one of the ANCYL members who piloted the Youth League's Programme of Action in 1949. He also led a series of students' strikes and demonstrations, thereby incurring the wrath of authorities. His student grants were withdrawn, but with some financial assistance from friends, Sobukwe completed his BA degree, as well as a teacher's diploma. He became a teacher at Standerton, in the Transvaal, but was dismissed in 1952 for participating in the Defiance Campaign. He was reinstated, but soon left to take a post as a Language Assistant at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. There he enrolled for a BA in African Studies, graduating with Honours in Languages. He continued in that post until he resigned in 1960 to devote all his energies to the PAC, which had split from the African Nationalist Congress in 1959. In the same year, he became President of the PAC and Editor of their organ, the *Africanist*.

He delivered the principal address at the PAC's inaugural conference held in Orlando East, Soweto in April 1959. At its first and only annual conference held in December 1959, the PAC decided to launch a Positive Action Campaign "to overthrow white domination and to attain freedom and independence." It was to take the form of "decisive and final positive action against the pass laws." On 18 March 1960, Sobukwe announced that the "anti-pass" campaign would be launched three days later. In instructions sent to all PAC branches, Sobukwe warned, "our people must be taught now and continuously to observe absolute non-violence."<sup>1</sup>

On 21 March 1960, Sobukwe, accompanied by about 50 of his supporters, left his home in Mofolo Village, Soweto, marched to the Orlando Police Station and presented himself for arrest. In many parts of South Africa, thousands of Africans demonstrated peacefully and surrendered themselves at police stations, asking to be arrested. The police, however, opened fire against unarmed peaceful demonstrators at Sharpeville, 68 people were shot and killed (most of them in the back as they fled) and 184 were wounded. The police also resorted to ruthlessness in the African townships of Cape Town. Sobukwe and some of his lieutenants were charged, on 23 March 1960 with sedition and incitement to riot. When they were brought to trial in April, they entered no plea and rejected both legal defence and bail.<sup>2</sup>

Sobukwe, a charismatic leader of the PAC who had a large following, was sentenced in the Johannesburg Regional Court on 4 May 1960 and served three years' imprisonment at the Stofberg Prison in the Orange Free State.

In an outrageous attack on the human rights and privileges of a prisoner completing his sentence, the Apartheid Parliament passed the General Law Amendment Act in 1963 extending Sobukwe's imprisonment. This was enacted a day before his release. Under Section 10(1) (a) of this Act, the government was empowered to detain persons after they had completed sentences for

political offences. Sobukwe was the only person to be detained under this provision, which came to be known as the "Sobukwe clause." The Apartheid regime was so afraid of his influence that they separated him from other political prisoners and kept him at a secluded small house on Robben Island.

For six years Sobukwe had to endure imprisonment in total isolation from other prisoners. His only "human" contact was with vicious, racist warders. This was an intolerable form of psychological torture. During his incarceration Sobukwe frequently complained about persistent harassment but on 16 April 1969 in a letter addressed to Pelsler, Sobukwe noted that the complaints he had made in 1967 were, to a large extent, settled. However, new forms of harassment and systematic torture had arisen. These included: being served decomposed food deliberately and at times served crushed bones soup; constant interference with electric power supply; inordinate delays with mail, which affected his UNISA lectures as well as interfering with his Netherlands studies and interference with a fruit parcel from Stuttards.<sup>3</sup> Most egregious, however, was that starting on 21 March 1969, Sobukwe was subjected

came into the open...I am, therefore, in accordance with the provisions of the order served on me, appealing to you for protection against some of your men who are supposed to provide me with protection."<sup>4</sup>

Sobukwe was subsequently released on 13 May 1969 and confined under house arrest to Kimberley where he had no kith or kin. Prior to his release, Pelsler informed the press that Sobukwe should not "live where he can, with reasonable ease, resume subversive activities." The day before his release, on 12 May 1969, Sobukwe was served with a five-year banning order under the Suppression of Communism Act. He was prohibited from leaving the municipality of Kimberley; attending any gathering; leaving his residence between 6:00pm and 6:00am; communicating with any other banned persons; giving educational instruction at an educational institution; and, lastly, participating in any publication. No statement by him could be quoted.<sup>5</sup>

A year after his release, Sobukwe applied for a passport to take up a research and lecturing fellowship in African Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin in the United States where he was also admitted as a PhD student. At the same time, he was offered two part-time lecturing

**“Accepting the proposed Wits offer and work conditions would have been akin to being under house arrest in Kimberly.”**

to what he termed systematic torture as concentrated, compressed hot air was introduced into his room, stifling him with unbearable heat. On 3 April 1969, compressed cold air was now introduced, simultaneously or switched alternately with hot air. Sobukwe complained about this form of torture but the Commanding Officer showed no interest and two psychiatrists were called in as a result of his persistent protest to authorities. Again there was no solution to this problem as their report was not submitted. Sobukwe wrote the following to Pelsler: "In light of present experience, I realise that this treatment of hot and cold compressed air has been going on for years. It didn't start on 21 March. Only, on that day, it

posts at Roosevelt University and the Adlai Stevenson Institute in Chicago. Sobukwe ultimately accepted the University of Wisconsin offer together with a revised offer from Roosevelt University. But the Apartheid regime denied him permission to leave, so on 23 May 1970, he applied for an exit permit. After a threat of court action, the Minister of Interior granted him the permit. But he could not leave South Africa as the banning orders confined him to Kimberley and Pelsler refused to relax the order. The defiant Sobukwe applied to the Pretoria Supreme Court for an order to permit him to travel to the Jan Smuts Airport to leave South Africa, but on 22 June 1971, the Court ruled that the restrictions under the



banning orders were equivalent to a court order of imprisonment and dismissed the application. The decision was upheld by the Appellate Division on 12 December 1971. Earlier, on 8 July 1970, Sobukwe had noted: "I am, therefore, a prisoner of the Minister of Justice, whose restrictions make it impossible for me to take employment for which I am qualified and which can pay me satisfactorily. I have four children at school, two of whom have this year entered high school. My wife is unemployed, and since I am no longer in jail I am expected to provide for my family and educate my children."<sup>6</sup>

But an intriguing incidence that had major political ramifications occurred just before Sobukwe's release on 13 May 1969. Bozzoli authored the following incriminating letter addressed to Pelsler. It was dated 5 May 1969 and is worth quoting in full:

"We are glad that you have now felt able to announce the release of Richard [sic – note that the honourable Vice-Chancellor could not tell the difference between 'Richard' and 'Robert'] Sobukwe and as this University was his previous employer I feel that we might be thought to have some moral responsibility to assist him in his rehabilitation on his release from prison. I would like you to know that if it would be helpful to the government, the University would be prepared to try to fit him into the

teaching establishment as a Language Assistant. This would necessitate our creating a new post and we would naturally have to satisfy ourselves that Mr Sobukwe could and would fill the post completely and adequately. As these steps take time to complete, it would be helpful to the University to know confidentially, as soon as it suits your convenience, whether the restrictions which might be placed upon him would be such that he would be unable to accept employment of this type, but our willingness to assist in his rehabilitation might be of assistance to yourself in determining the conditions of his release. I need hardly add that the whole matter would be handled, on our part, with the minimum of publicity, and we would ensure that Mr Sobukwe understood this and would appreciate that we could not retain him on the staff if he courted publicity or became active in politics. We realise full well that we might land ourselves in difficulties but we are prepared to face this if it would help your Department and the position generally."<sup>7</sup>

The question is: Why would Bozzoli be prepared to defend and be of assistance to the Apartheid regime if Sobukwe continued his interest in politics? Is Bozzoli in the last line of his letter, referring to an ideological or a political position? Maybe Bozzoli abhorred African nationalism as an ideology and was trying to curtail its ascendancy by being "prepared to try to fit him [Sobukwe] into the teaching establishment [though] we could not retain him on the staff if he courted publicity or became active in politics."

Professor Bozzoli's stance was, in essence quite morally repugnant, not to mention the fact that he wanted to be taken into confidence by Pelsler concerning possible repressive actions to be exercised against Sobukwe after his release from Robben Island. Really, this was not rehabilitation but simply a case whereby the University officially assumed duties of the Apartheid regime. One can therefore deduce that Sobukwe would not have been better

off at Wits if Bozzoli's machinations had become a reality. Accepting the proposed Wits offer and work conditions would have been akin to being under house arrest in Kimberly.

Furthermore, why would Bozzoli offer Sobukwe a post as a Language Assistant; a post similar to that which he had held before his imprisonment? Bozzoli failed to consider the fact that by 1969 Sobukwe held a second degree, a BSc (Economics) and was enrolled for articles and studies for his LLB degree. Would it not have been better to offer him perhaps a Junior Lectureship post, or were lectureships a preserve for white academics during the 1960s? Was it a case of African intellectuals doomed to remain assistants for the remainder of their careers? Such demeaning humiliation was not unique to Sobukwe's case because the brilliant Dr Bhambatha Wallet Vilakazi, regardless of the fact that he obtained his PhD degree at Wits during the 1940s, remained officially a Language Assistant in the African Studies department for years. Notwithstanding his academic achievements, Dr Vilakazi was never officially recognised as a qualified lecturer by the University. As members of the supposedly superior race, white students were duly informed by the racist university administration that they were not obliged to follow some of Dr Vilakazi's instructions.

To conclude, on the Sobukwe affair, the leadership of the University of the Witwatersrand nailed their political colours to the mast. The unanswered big question is why? For nine years Sobukwe was subjected to 12-hour house arrest and under constant surveillance by the security forces. He passed away on 27 February 1978 at the relatively young age of 54. Although he died from lung cancer no doubt his traumatic experience as a political prisoner contributed to his early death. However, he remains a respected and well-loved political leader of the national liberation movement of South Africa. ■

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Unit on Apartheid, Department of Political and Security Council Affairs, Notes and Document, No 3/72, January 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> National Archives Depot (NAD), Sobukwe File 2/3/2/1503 Vol 1V.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> NAD, Sobukwe File 10/3/2/1/1503, Vol 5 and File 2/3/2/1503, Vol 7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, File 2/3/2/1503 Vol 1V.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, File 2/3/2/1503 Vol 1V.