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Potlako Leballo – the Man Who Hurried to Meet his Destiny

by JOEL BOLNICK*

Oh no! Don't be a child man! I don't mean that! What I mean is that if they won't believe the truth, then you must tell them a lie.

Cell-mate to Monare, in P. Lanham and A. Mopeli-Paulus, *Blanket Boy's Moon* (Claremont, 1984), p. 13.

THIS is an account of the early life of a widely regarded hero of resistance in South Africa who constantly betrayed the absurdity, the hypocrisy, and the staggering human frailty of the modern leader. In later years Potlako Kitchener Leballo also gained renown as a mesmerising orator who lived to dramatise, to command the centre of attention, to captivate listeners with impassioned stories. Having grown up in a world of oral culture it is not surprising that he expressed himself best in the spoken rather than the written word. Leballo's autobiographical sketches, which have been recorded piecemeal by numerous authors, are festooned with exaggerations, illusions, and ambiguities. However, he was an intelligent fabricator of information, with a talent for fitting a story into its appropriate context. This alone makes him an exciting subject for a biography, since the reconstruction of his life and its links to the social structure provide stiff tests for the sleuthing and analytical skills of the researcher.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH

Leballo was born in Lesotho, then known as Basutoland, on 19 December in the early 1920s. If there is uncertainty about the year of his birth, by contrast there is reasonable clarity about the broader social conditions into which he was born. By then the country was well on its way to being incorporated into the wider capitalist economy of the sub-continent, in what to this day remains its characteristic form: as a labour pool for the mining industry. During the years of Leballo's

* Senior Researcher, Southern African Catholic Council for Social Service Housing, Cape Town, under the auspices of the Southern African Catholic Bishops Conference, Pretoria. Potlako roughly translates as 'One who is in a hurry', Leballo as 'Destiny'.

childhood the community in which he lived was undergoing convulsive change. If capitalism was beginning to gain a decisive upper hand, with agricultural commodity production and migrant labour being the ascendant forms of social relations in the little village of Lifelekoaneng (near Mafeteng), pre-capitalist traditions, values, and cultures were nevertheless powerful psychological influences.

This conflict between rival ideological inputs was played out within Leballo's immediate family. His father was an Anglican catechist who taught at St Paul's Mission in Tsikoane.¹ Potlako, however, was the youngest of 14 children, and it comes as no surprise that he was estranged from his absentee father. As was often the custom in Basotho households, the boy was raised by his extended family, his father's two older brothers being the most influential figures in his young life. One of them, Motsoasele, remained a pagan until his death in 1947, having fought and lost an eye at the battle of Qalabane in the Gun War of 1880. His proto-nationalist sentiments did not subside with the defeat of Mokoanyane his chief, and 40 years later he spent a while in jail for defying the colonial administration. By contrast, the other uncle, Nathaniel, was an austere pastor who had studied at an Anglican school in the Eastern Cape. He exerted a heavy-handed discipline on his nephew, and it was probably at his bidding that Leballo himself received a rigorous Christian education, first at St Saviours in Hlotse and then, after being expelled, at Masite Institution, near Morija.

Lithoko Tso Makoloane

Motoasele, however, was able to console himself with the knowledge that the westernised influences on Leballo were being offset by the especially close relationship that had developed between himself and the child. From a practical point of view, Motsoasele was able to notch up as a triumph the fact that he succeeded in abducting his nephew from his school and smuggling him to an initiation lodge at Pitseng in the Leribe area. This is actually what cost Leballo his position at St Saviours, because it was mission policy to refuse to re-admit pupils who had run away to '*lebollo*'.

Leballo claimed never to have made any practical use of the ceremonies he underwent, or the teachings received at this initiation school. Although it is both impolite and methodologically unsound to

¹ Most biographical data on Leballo's early childhood is derived from Bernard Leeman, *Lesotho and the Struggle for Azania* (London, 1985), and Gail Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa* (Berkeley, 1978).

gainsay one's informant, it is essential, as this very contravention will show, to subject all Leballo's statements to vigorous processes of verification. To this day, initiation ceremonies in Lesotho are shrouded in extreme secrecy. However, one important aspect of '*lebollo*' has been well documented by a number of anthropologists; namely, that every initiate must give a solo recitation known as '*lithoko tso makoloane*'. According to Charles Adams, a respected anthropologist, 'These praises build personal images of identity... they are imaginery and wishful constructions directed at what the initiate feels will influence his future life.'² It would appear to be too much of a coincidence that this centrepiece of Basotho oral culture so strongly resembles the form that Leballo's later fabrications were to take.

Rite of Passage

Like hundreds of thousands from his generation, Leballo soon succumbed to the lure of South Africa's cities. Luckier than most, he managed to escape the grinding process of proletarianisation, because very few Africans were able to make the leap from rural homestead to segregated urban township without dropping into the yawning chasm of wage labour. One of the most dependable tight-ropes across this abyss was studying to be a school teacher. The members of Leballo's family, like many others of similar socio-economic background, had unswerving faith in western education. Seduced by the new patterns of consumption that were neither available in rural Lesotho nor affordable on a migrant labourer's wage, they determined to pay for Leballo's further schooling. In early 1940 he became a boarder at Lovedale College, near Alice, in the Eastern Cape, and a student in its teachers training school.

This induction into the austere, rather reified grounds of Africa's oldest and most venerated mission school was to be the young teenager's rite of passage into South Africa's rapidly industrialising and intensely racist society. It was to prove to be an initiation far more lasting in its impact than the rituals undergone a few years earlier at Pitseng. Not that Leballo absorbed much of the institution's self-satisfied pedagogy in his first, brief sojourn there, but rather his enrolment at Lovedale permanently broke the ties that bound him to the rural Basotho community of his childhood. The cultural and ideological baggage of a pre-capitalist, pastoral society accompanied

² Quoted in David Coplan, 'In the Time of Cannibals: Basotho working class aurature and the meaning of Sesotho', *African Studies*, University of Cape Town, 1989, p. 5.

him on this great migration. In a paradox, easier to fathom than that of the man himself, this was to become the fulcrum of Leballo's psychic make-up.

But it must have been the competing influences of the Christianised, 'modernised' side of Leballo's upbringing that made him respond to a call by a white man for Africans to enlist in a white man's army in order to fight in a white man's war. During the latter half of 1940, Jan Hofmeyer, then Minister of Finance in Jan Smuts's Cabinet, came to Lovedale to deliver a speech concerning World War II and the South African Government's decision to commit troops to fight in it. Leballo, who had been at the College for about half a year, was one of the students who heard Hofmeyer speak, and was sufficiently impressed with the description of army life, and the glory of being a soldier, that he decided to enlist. The fact that Leballo's father had served in a Basotho contingent in World War I provided his naïve sense of heroism with further positive reinforcement.³

Nevertheless, Leballo's decision to join the Union Defence Force was quite out of line with the general response by people of his social standing. Most of the educated Africans of the times had strong anti-war feelings, and the awkward loyalty to 'King and Empire' that had prompted many schooled, westernised Africans to serve in World War I had not survived the political and economic shocks of the intervening years.⁴ Many Africans had learned from bitter personal experience that the great western traditions of freedom and democracy that Hitler was threatening in Europe, and that the white régime was exhorting them to defend, were being denied on a daily basis inside South Africa. This lucidity often found angry expression. That the agitated critique frequently highlighted the material basis and repercussions of these denials of political rights is a clear indication that the black petty bourgeoisie was well aware that the racial component of South African capitalism was slowly pushing them as a class towards either proletarianisation or destitution.

NATIVE MILITARY CORPS

Leballo was apparently innured to these deterrents. Realising that he would probably be recognised and sent back to school were he to try and enlist in the small town of Alice, Leballo sought out the anonymity

³ Letter from Leballo to O. B. Bull, 14 May 1947; correspondence re. Lovedale riots, Cory Library, Grahamstown.

⁴ Cf. Albert Grundlingh, *Fighting Their Own War* (Johannesburg, 1987).

TABLE I Leballo's Record of Service

Potlako Kitchener Leballo. N4826.

Dependants: wife, child, sister, grandmother.

Pre-enlistment occupation: scholar, Lovedale College.

18 Oct. 40	Attested Krugersdorp: native Military Corps (N.M.C.) General List
1 Feb. 41	Promoted to corporal
12 Feb. 41	Detached to 1st South African Tank Corps at Kaffirskraal
17 Mar. 41	Arrived in Nairobi by road convoy
11 July 41	Disembarked at Suez
	Detached to 743 Recce 1st Battalion, South African Division
12 July 41	Posted to 3rd South African Recce Battalion
6 Sep. 41	Reverted to rank of private at own request
19 Sep. 41	Posted to N.M.C. General List
14 Apr. 42	Detached to South African Vehicle Recreation Park, linked to South African Technical Services Corps, based on Geneifa, 20 miles north of Suez
29 May 42	Posted to 204 Motorised Transport Company (Reserve), promoted to corporal, and attached to 1st South African Division, 8th Army, based at Tahag, moved between Gazala and El Alamein
22 Aug. 43	N.M.C. General List
14 Nov. 43	Returned to Union ('Undesirable')
25 Feb. 44	Non-European Armed Services (N.E.A.S.) Pretoria
1 Nov. 44	On strength of General Service Corps/N.E.A.S. Pretoria
23 Apr. 45	Detached to N.M.C. Pretoria
1 Dec. 45	Promoted to sergeant
14 Jan. 46	Asks to be detached
19 Jan. 46	Last day in Union Defence Force. Left dispersal depot

Effective service: 1,917 days

Detention: Nil

Not a prisoner of war

Non-claimant of pension

Campaigns: Mefunion

of a big city. He travelled by train to Johannesburg and then made his way to Krugersdorp where, on 18 October 1940, he was attested into the recently created, Africans only, Native Military Corps (N.M.C.) of the Union Defence Force.

In later years, Leballo's prominence in the formation of the Pan-Africanist Congress (P.A.C.) resulted in various authors devoting a few sentences to his army experiences. As always, the original source of much of this personal history chose to exaggerate, having grown up in a culture in which embellishment was an accepted poetic conceit of the autobiographer.⁵ This is perhaps what makes Leballo's personal

⁵ Thomas Karis and Gwendolen Carter, Gail Gerhart and Bernard Leeman all interviewed Leballo – none of them in depth.

pathology so interesting. In his ego-driven narration – and oratory, according to those who heard him make his rousing speeches – Leballo had the gift of being able to transform the drudgery of daily survival into the heroic. He took the humble events that comprised the ensemble of his experiences, and made them the foundations for a passionate, sweeping, and provocative social commentary. Leballo's account of his war-time adventures is a clever (although sometimes sloppy) fabrication, but every incident is based on fact (see Table 1)⁶. In more ways than one, Leballo was the producer of his own history.

I have chosen to describe what was most probably his actual army career – not as others dutifully recorded his representation of this – partly to set the record straight, but also to show that the everyday achievements of black soldiers (African, Coloured, and Indian) in South Africa's armed forces were formidable enough on their own. They did not need acts of extraordinary heroism testifying on their behalf. Their experiences provide a clear example of the intimate connection between the modern army and the development of generalised labour. Beneath the grotesque counterfeit of the heroic soldier (of which Leballo's legend is but one tiny reflection) lies a sobering reality. Armies are not arenas of great men and great deeds: these are merely exceptional and incidental by-products. Rather armies are extortionately cheap and extremely perilous forms of wage labour. As such they mirror the social relations of the societies that spawn them.

Thus the South African army was run, not only on hierarchical lines, but on strictly segregated ones as well. Black South Africans were recruited to perform the same back-breaking and menial tasks in the theatre of war as they were required to do at home. Many did end up on the frontlines, and some even were eventually armed – usually with captured enemy weapons – in spite of the absurd but revealing injunction forbidding black soldiers to carry weapons other than assegais or knobkierries. This does not mean that they were regarded as fighting forces. They ended up at the frontlines because that was where their labour as orderlies, cooks, drivers, stretcher bearers, and road builders was needed.

Hand in hand with the social and economic function of the hard labour of black recruits went the internal organisation of the army.

⁶ Compiled from Leballo's Record of Service and other documents in his personal file; South African Defence Force (S.A.D.F.) Archives, Pretoria. This is where the army correspondence hereinafter cited is also located.

Living arrangements and conditions, for example, were almost identical to those in South Africa's mining compounds, where the workers were also forced to obey orders, and to accept the ignomies of rank, command structure, and authoritarian discipline. There too, Africans were placed in life-threatening situations, and subjected to constant physical danger with neither adequate compensation nor personal protection. In the mines, as in the army, Africans were housed in barracks – in fact, the compounds of several mining companies were leased to the N.M.C. during the war in order to accommodate black soldiers who were undergoing basic training before being sent to the frontlines. By the time Leballo attested in Krugersdorp, seven compounds, able to accommodate 7,750 'natives', had been leased from mining companies.⁷

Leballo was trained as a lorry driver at the Kaffirskraal compound near Zonderwater, owned by Consolidated Goldfields, where in the racist lexicon of South Africa, the accommodation 'wasn't fit for a white man', as the high command of the N.M.C. attested, but with predictable euphemism: 'On reviewing the matter of accommodation for European personnel, it is regretted that [Consolidated Goldfields] is unable to lease to the Government any suitable premises for occupation by Europeans.'⁸

To get a broader picture of the symbiotic relationship between the mining industry and the state it is necessary to examine the policies governing the recruitment of Africans into the armed forces, including their remuneration. So sensitive was the ruling party to the labour needs of the mining industry that the recruiting of Africans was taken out of the hands of the army's Directorate of Mobilisation and became the responsibility of the Native Affairs Department (N.A.D.), which came to an amicable agreement with the mining industry soon after the creation of the N.M.C. in June 1940. As a result, active recruiting was pursued only in areas of the country from which the mines did not draw substantial supplies of labour. In order to prevent desertion from the Witwatersrand goldfields it was arranged that Native Commissioners and Magistrates based in Johannesburg would not take any active steps to increase recruitment⁹ – that is why Leballo attested in Krugersdorp after having arrived by train in Johannesburg.

To make doubly sure that there would be no excessive siphoning off

⁷ War Diaries, W 31a 40.

⁸ Ibid. SW/1/2/10.

⁹ Native Military Corps (N.M.C.) 5672, National Armed Service (N.A.S.), 38/4/2, memorandum from the Office of the Director of the Non-European Armed Services (N.E.A.S.), dated 20 November 1940.

of cheap wage labour from South Africa's most entrenched industry, the N.A.D. pegged the rates of pay for 'native' privates at 1s. 6d. per day, and this compared very favourably, from the employers point of view, with the low wages paid by the mining industry. By contrast, 'European' troops were paid 3s. 6d. per day, and Indian and 'Coloured' troops 2s. 6d.

The Abyssinian Campaign

Four months after joining the Native Military Corps, Leballo, now a corporal, arrived by road convoy in Nairobi on 17 March 1941. Practically all black South Africans who served in the Abyssinian campaign endured this arduous overland safari, while white soldiers sailed on troop carriers from Durban to Mombasa.¹⁰ Many years later, when Leballo had become famous enough to grant interviews, he volunteered very little information about his East African experiences, and his military service record does little more than mention that he was a motorised transport (M.T.) driver attached to the 743rd Recce Battalion of the 1st South African Division.

The Italians had already been pushed out by Kenya, Egypt, and the Sudan, and on the very day that Leballo arrived in Kenya the Allied forces re-captured Berbera, the capital of British Somaliland. By 28 March the two ancient Ethiopian cities of Keren and Harar had been taken, and Addis Ababa fell during the first week of April. White South African soldiers were amongst the first to march into the capital, paving the way for the triumphant return of Emperor Haile Selassie, the ruler of what, until the Italian invasion of 1936, had been one of only two internationally recognised independent black African states. En route to Addis Ababa the South Africans had covered over a thousand miles in less than three months.

In the annals of South Africa's war history the East African offensive is singled out as an unparalleled success. There certainly were frequent and ferocious clashes with the retreating Italians, but the campaign was won so convincingly because of the formidable efforts of the engineers, road construction workers, and M.T. drivers. Not surprisingly it was the élite engineering corps, especially the university-trained officers, who received the lion's share of the accolade, and one must look to the footnotes and parentheses of South Africa's war histories to find tributes to the many 'non-Europeans' who worked so

¹⁰ Michael Vane, 'Snobbery Under Arms', in *Springs Advertiser* (Transvaal), October 1943.

hard under horrendous conditions and in inhospitable terrain. In order that the 1st South African Infantry Brigade could enter Addis Ababa in triumph, and that the Prime Minister, Jan Smuts, could make pious speeches about the bravery of South Africa's fighting forces, roads had to be carved out of bush and over high mountain passes, while bridges that had been dynamited by the retreating Italians had to be reconstructed.¹¹

One of the most remarkable feats of the war was the way in which South African combat forces were kept supplied with food, fuel, and ammunition during their lightning drive. Leballo was almost certainly one of the 'non-European' M.T. drivers who, often under enemy fire, ferried reinforcements and supplies up and down the roads that had been built by the hard labour of his fellow South Africans, the largest proportion of whom were black and voteless like himself. Their accomplishment is all the more remarkable when one considers the intense heat that was experienced (up to 140 °F in the shade), as well as the torrential rainfall.

Inveterate Travelling in North Africa

By June 1941 the South African offensive in Abyssinia was over, and the triumphant 1st Division was sent to North Africa to bolster the Allied defences in preparation for Rommel's pending offensive. Leballo disembarked in Suez on 11 July after a tortuous journey by sea from Mogadishu. There is little doubt that crowded conditions, vile food, endless inspections, and the boarding up of portholes in accordance with 'black-out regulations' had combined to turn the voyage into a nightmare.

Leballo later claimed that the ship carrying his contingent was sunk between Alexandria and Crete, and that he was rescued by Turkish sailors and somehow returned to the South African army – a surprisingly inaccurate extravagation for someone who, as a general rule, tried to provide his embellishments with a touch of credibility by being faithful to historical, chronological, and geographical details. Leballo certainly did not travel by boat beyond Suez, and his disembarkation was evidently quite routine. However, on numerous

¹¹ By an ironic twist of history, back in South Africa the Italian prisoners-of-war were put to work building roads over similarly almost-impassable areas while being guarded by soldiers from the Cape Coloured Corps and the N.M.C., armed only with assegais and knobkerries.

occasions Leballo must have personally experienced the terror of a Luftwaffe *Blitzkrieg* because there were almost daily air attacks on the Egyptian towns of Suez, Alexandria, and Cairo during July and August 1941.¹²

Having survived this fiery introduction to the brutality and carnage of the North African theatre of war, Leballo was detached to the 3rd S.A. Recce Battalion which was then scouting behind enemy lines.¹³ It would appear that after enduring such a hazardous situation for almost two months the ever-resourceful Leballo, already battle-weary from the East African campaign and the bombings at Suez, made up his mind to arrange a safer posting. This is the most plausible explanation for Leballo's sudden request to be reverted to the ranks – a demotion that meant a 50 per cent reduction in basic pay, from 2s. 9d. to 1s. 6d. per day. Exactly two weeks after again becoming a private, Leballo found himself posted to the N.M.C. general list and stationed in the somewhat safer environment of Cairo.

The hardships endured and the brutality witnessed by Leballo in the months since his flight from Lovedale had presumably sharpened his perceptions. No longer likely to be taken in by the bluster of ministers or of generals, and increasingly cynical about the avowedly just ends of the war, Leballo lost interest in the concepts of honour and heroism, and in the bloody battle cries that they inspired. Prior to the rapid build-up of troops in the desert in response to the assault on the Gazala line by the Afrika Korps, Leballo kicked his heels in the canal region, and with the exception of a two-week stint in Geneifa, at the South African Vehicle Recreation Park, spent six months in the vicinity of Suez and Cairo.

It was here that Leballo would have come into regular contact with soldiers from other countries. The comparatively comradely treatment that he received from some of the British and Australian troops must have stood in sharp contrast to what he had been conditioned to expect from people with white skins. That this relatively colour-blind atmosphere had a significant impact on most South Africans can hardly be in doubt. In a letter that was opened by the army censor, a white soldier gave vent to his offended racial arrogance: 'The [black South Africans] tell us there is no colour bar up here. We have to be very careful how we speak to the bastards, but they can talk as they like

¹² *The Cape Times* (Cape Town), 5 August to 2 September 1941, reported as many as 177 civilian deaths as a result of *Blitzkriegs* in Egypt's canal zone.

¹³ For positions of various battalions, see Neil Orpen, *War in the Desert* (Cape Town, 1971).

to us... The Tommy is to blame for being friendly with them and telling them all kinds of b... s...'.¹⁴

But what threatened many white South Africans most of all, and drove the repressed and the reactionary in the Union into paroxysms of moral frenzy, was the fact that the fleshpots of the region were available at the going market prices to all soldiers, irrespective of race. Thus black South Africans 'were allowed to drink in the same canteens, also in bars in Cairo, and when they get back they will want to take out our women just as they do here'.¹⁵ Although it is possible that Leballo as a devout, teetotal Anglican foreswore both women and wine, the racial and national polyglot of Allied-occupied Cairo made a lasting impact on his psyche.

Tales of Prisoners of War and Courts Martial

In contrast to the reticence showed when discussing his personal experience of the Eritrean campaign, Leballo was expansive about his participation in the desert war of North Africa. Never one to miss the opportunity to vividly embroider the humdrum tapestry of everyday life, Leballo insisted in interviews with prominent researchers that he had twice been taken prisoner, first at Sidi Rezegh and then again at Tobruk, and that he had been court-martialled and given a death sentence (commuted by General Alexander) for leading a revolt against discriminatory practices in the Union Defence Force.¹⁶

These two claims are so startling that they warrant close examination, but before that can be done some elaboration is necessary. If one reconstructs Leballo's personal account from the interesting items that are scattered in numerous sources, the following colourful picture emerges. Leballo was captured at Sidi Rezegh, after a German tank had flushed him out of the foxhole in which he had been hiding. Fortunately for Leballo, though, this imprisonment was brief, since he was released almost immediately by an Allied counter-attack. He was recaptured at Tobruk, sent to an Italian prisoner-of-war camp in the desert and from there to Germany, to be held near Dresden and later sent to Hamburg, where he remained until the end of the war. After being debriefed in England he sailed back home to South Africa.

It is tempting not to violate this *lithoko tso makoloane*, to neither gut the

¹⁴ Middle East Censorship Summary, N.A.S. 6/42, N.M.C. 22.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Thomas Karis and Gwendolen M. Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge. A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, Vol. 4, *Political Profiles, 1882-1964* (Stanford, 1977), pp. 54-5.

poetry nor pare away the poetic license. What is of relevance here are the general social events the story bears testimony to, and not the life of the individual, embossed as it is by these appropriated experiences. The naked facts, though not nearly as flattering to Leballo, bear equally eloquent social testimony.

By the end of the war some 1,600 members of the N.M.C. had been taken prisoner, of whom 1,264, along with 8,960 whites, 380 'Coloureds', and 118 Indians were captured at the fall of Tobruk on 21 June 1941. The Germans raised the ire of some 'European' non-ranking soldiers by incarcerating them in the same pens as their 'non-white' countrymen. Quite clearly recalcitrant in regard to the official ideology of the Nazi state, the German soldiers scornfully dismissed a request from white South Africans for racially segregated lock-ups. This was perhaps one of the most unequivocal incidents of racial equality between black and white South African soldiers throughout the war.

In many prisoner-of-war camps, whether in the Libyan desert or in Europe, bugs, fleas, lice, and rats were indiscriminate in their infestation of barracks and the spreading of discomfort and disease. The constant shortages of food, compounded by the frequent delay or non-arrival of Red Cross parcels, resulted in death being a constant menace for many prisoners. If anything those black South Africans who were housed in particularly miserable camps were in graver risk than their counterparts. This was primarily because the U.D.F. spent only *9d.* per day on the ration allowances organised by the Red Cross for African prisoners of war in comparison to *2s.* for 'Europeans'.¹⁷ In notorious camps such as Babenhausen and Chartes, numerous members of the Non-European Armed Services died of illness or starvation.

If these risks provided a grisly reflection of the conditions that farm, and particularly convict, labourers in the Union could expect to endure, then the kind of work that African prisoners of war were forced to perform was often reminiscent of the toil expected from black miners. Albeit contrary to article 31 of the Geneva Convention, the Axis powers made N.M.C. prisoners of war handle munitions.¹⁸ Other forms of forced labour, not proscribed by any internationally ratified expression of conscience, were frequently imposed on 'non-European' prisoners. They loaded and unloaded ships, demolished buildings that had been damaged in air attacks, and constructed railway lines. Not infrequently black South African prisoners were forced to work under

¹⁷ AG(PW), Box 118.

¹⁸ Ibid. Box 119, O(1)B 12/1 (8149).

conditions of extreme danger, notably at German and Italian air-force bases which were prime targets for Allied bombing attacks.

The overwhelming majority of the African prisoners taken at the fall of Tobruk in June 1942 were released on its recapture by the Allied forces in December. Within days, ships laden with essential supplies began to arrive at the docks, and the just released N.M.C. prisoners 'were called upon to fill the breach', as one high-ranking white officer of the N.E.A.S. explained.¹⁹ No doubt there were a number of Africans in Tobruk who were reminded that, as symbols of servitude and as living embodiments of manual labour, they were there to be ruthlessly exploited by both the Germans and the Allies.

What about Leballo? How do his experiences, shorn of embellishments, tally with this broad social picture? At the time of the fall of Tobruk the entire 1st South African Division of the Eighth Army was engaged in a frantic retreat to the town of Gazala, but once the tide had turned in the Allies favour, Leballo's 204 M.T. Company was stationed at a place called Tahag and moved between Gazala and El Alamein. In the meanwhile it was the 2nd South African Division which had been trapped at Tobruk, and so *if* Leballo had been taken prisoner it was not there. His assertion that he spent a number of years in P.O.W. camps in Europe also appears to be another example of a vivid imagination. Leballo's service record might be sadly lacking in information as well as details – there is a 14-month gap between May 1942 and August 1943 – but its entries regarding his detachments are difficult to refute.

On 14 November 1943, Leballo, once again a corporal, returned to South Africa. The reason for his early demobilisation is added parenthetically to the entries for that day. '(Undesirable)' it says in regimented lettering, little more than a tantalising hint. According to Leballo, just before the camp near Tobruk was overrun by the Germans, a fight had broken out between South African troops over a quantity of rum that had been commandeered by a number of black soldiers. White South Africans were issued with rations of alcohol (usually brandy, but sometimes rum) that were denied to blacks. The rumpus that ensued over the contraband liquor provided the black soldiers with a concrete focus for their widespread grievances, and order was only eventually restored by troops from the Indian army.²⁰ Leballo claimed that he had been court-martialled and sentenced to

¹⁹ Letter from the Directorate of Demobilisation of Non-European Armed Services to U.D.F. Administrative Headquarters, December 1942; *ibid.*

²⁰ Leeman, *op. cit.* p. 67.

death as a result of his leadership in the mutiny, and that he was reprieved at the intervention of General Alexander. We are left to conclude for ourselves that the grievances were not redressed, and that the collapse of Tobruk diverted attention from these matters.

What is the available evidence? The fact that 204 M.T. Company was attached to the 1st South African Division of the Eighth Army which swarmed past Tobruk in the days of the so-called 'Gazala gallop' before the Allied surrender does not categorically refute Leballo's claim, but once again his record of service is soberingly devoid of comment. It is extremely dubious that an event as heinous in the eyes of the army as participating in a mutiny, would not have been recorded. In fact, in his entire personnel file there is no mention of any such treasonous behaviour.²¹

Although Leballo probably did not participate in, let alone lead, the 'rum mutiny' that he describes, it would appear that this did occur and, more importantly, that it was not the only incident of its kind.²² By early 1943 the situation had become so serious that the Commanding Officer of the Non-European Armed Services wrote a lengthy letter to the Adjutant-General in which he expressed his 'growing anxiety and apprehension on the rising tempo of unrest amongst [members] of the N.E.A.S.', and complained despairingly about 'a growing momentum of discontent' and a 'breakdown of discipline by insubordination, mutiny and crime'.²³

It is not surprising that there were scores of incidents of passive defiance and personal insubordination by black soldiers. Given that all those around them in the theatres of war were armed to the teeth it is not surprising that discontent was often suffocated before it blossomed into full-scale rebellion. Acutely aware of the fact that guns trained on the enemy could easily be turned on those who tried to fight against their oppression, black South African soldiers resorted to forms of resistance that were easier to implement, and more likely of at least alleviating individual conditions.

Intentional inefficiency was another common form of defiance. In a clear case of racist ideology reinforcing the doctrinaire stupidity of the army, laziness and ineptitude were officially explained as being

²¹ After 18 months of perseverance this writer was finally given access to Leballo's personal file. It was a disappointment as well as a revelation to discover that there was no mention of mutinies, courts martial, or reprieves in what is perhaps the most authoritative text on a soldier's official conduct.

²² Leeman, *op. cit.* p. 65, quotes a military adviser of the Indian High Commission in London as saying that there was evidence to corroborate the fact that such an 'incident' did take place.

²³ Letter from Colonel Stubbs to General Beyers, dated 15 March 1943; N.A.S. 3/36/4 N28 A1.

symptomatic of the racial degeneracy of 'non-Europeans', but at the same time it was argued that these ailments responded to treatment with heavy doses of discipline and punishment. A similar therapy was invariably suggested for drunkenness and *dagga*-smoking, both of them extensively practised forms of insubordination. Hierarchical intolerance of the use of alcohol and narcotics often had a distinctly racist flavour. Whereas substance abuse by white troops was explained in terms of individual pathology, the same behaviour by blacks was considered to be inescapable proof of their natural profligacy.²⁴

To some extent disturbances at the frontline were muted by the traumas and hardships that all troops in a combat zone inevitably endured. No such levelling experience could blunt the edge of the frustration of black troops who returned to, or were stationed within the borders of, the Union of South Africa. When Leballo was repatriated in November 1943, on the grounds of what must remain vaguely described as some form of recalcitrant behaviour, he returned to a turbulent environment. The discontent that was a grumbling undercurrent in North Africa, punctuated now and then by an angry outcry, was a torrent of rage in 'non-European' army barracks throughout the Union.

Many returning soldiers did not find it easy to settle into civilian life. Native Commissioners in distant corners of the country were deeply disturbed by the obduracy of demobilised troops who were no longer prepared to suffer their oppression in silence. The Native Commissioner of Sekukuniland, having been twice molested by ex-soldiers in his district, had to resort to police protection when he made his monthly payments to the wives and dependents of soldiers.²⁵ Such incidents of insubordination were widespread.

Less frequent but better documented were acts of collective resistance, including at least 15 riots recorded from November 1942 to October 1943. This is a startling statistic, given the repressive conditions in army barracks, the limited resources available to potential mutineers, the isolation of the different units, and the brute force at the disposal of loyal troops. In quite a number of the incidents that occurred during 1942-3, the commanding officers of the rioting troops had to call for outside assistance, which, without fail, arrived in the form of white infantry-men backed up with tanks.

The return from the slightly less-fettered social environment at the

²⁴ Letter from 107 S.A. Res. M. T. Coy. to Sub-Area Commander, Dire Daua, dated 26 May 1941; N.A.S. 3/36/1 N25.

²⁵ Letter from Native Commissioner, Sekukuniland, to Colonel Stubbs, dated 26 January 1944; N.A.S. 3/36/4 N28 A1.

frontlines to the deep-seated disaffection in South Africa's camps must have increased the political maturity of many black soldiers. It is interesting to note, however, that Leballo, who was to become a founder and leader of South Africa's most militant and dogmatic nationalist organisation, made no mention of his post-1943 army experiences. Instead he seduced his biographers with praise-poems – with what he thought they wanted to hear. It would be mistaken to accuse Leballo of lying, although like most humans he sometimes did. Rather he selected, re-arranged, and reconstructed.

The symbolic interpretations with which Leballo endowed certain episodes in his life create a somewhat distorted picture of the major social forces at work in the contexts he described. To reject the mythological re-arrangements of his life-experiences on the grounds of their inaccuracy would be to close off a potentially fruitful line of exploration into social processes, and the dialectical relationship between material events and individual consciousness. By digging through the topsoil of fabrications, the social researcher eventually reaches the bedrock of experiences from which they have evolved. Thus, Leballo's extensively documented responses to his own life combine to form an intricate maize which leads to a sober confrontation with actual social conditions. In turn it is only once one has come to grips with the relevance of the intricate web of variables that made up life in the N.M.C. during World War II that one can begin to understand the myriad of meanings embodied in Leballo's '*lithoko*'.

LOVEDALE COLLEGE

On 19 January 1946, Potlako Leballo walked out of the dispersal depot of the Union Defence Force at Modderbee, after having spent over five years in the Native Military Corps, and at the age of 26(?) decided to complete his training as a teacher. Leballo chose to go back to Lovedale College, where he had been a student in 1940 before volunteering for military service, and it is not difficult to understand why he took this decision given the harsh statutory constraints on African social and physical mobility. The wave of reform that had marked South Africa's political direction at the outbreak of the war had begun to recede. The startling statement by Jan Smuts that 'segregation has fallen on evil days' had been laid to rest under a series of repressive promulgations.

Nevertheless, Leballo's choice to return to College had not merely been foisted upon him by the grandiose designs of white rule. Within

the context in which he was operating, this ever-resourceful young Mosotho was able to maximise his options. On the grounds of his war experiences Leballo applied to the Directorate of Demobilisation for a subsistence allowance, and succeeded in securing a grant of £100, a sizeable sum when contrasted with the gratuity of 5s. per month which was awarded to African soldiers on demobilisation.²⁶ He was granted the allowance on the grounds of a declaration in which he claimed his mother, wife, child, and three sisters as dependents. This was a deliberate and understandable fabrication, quite in keeping with Leballo's highly developed sense of self-aggrandisement, as well as his increasing scorn for white authority. The fact of the matter was that Leballo supported neither his mother nor his sisters, and that he had in large part re-entered the educational system for the financial assistance that it had to offer.

Leballo also applied to the Governor-General's War Fund for a study grant of £150, payable over three years,²⁷ and hence by means of some adroit manoeuvring had parlayed the pittance provided by the state to African World War II veterans into a tidy security. However, in typical cavalier style Leballo was soon to jeopardise the fruits he had gleaned from one white authoritarian structure by flouting the rules of another. Barely six months after his return to Lovedale, Leballo was implicated in a spate of student disturbances which were grave enough to send white 'friends of the natives' into a paroxysm of anger and disbelief.

Rioting and Recrimination

On the night of 7 August 1946, between 100–200 male students went on a rampage that shook the serenity of Lovedale College. They stoned the classrooms and residences of this rural mission establishment, and made unsuccessful attempts to cut the electrical power and telephone lines, and to start numerous fires. The police at Alice were contacted, and their arrival occasioned fresh scenes of confrontation. The outbreak being regarded as one of public violence, the police announced that the matter was beyond the jurisdiction of the Lovedale authorities. The students then withdrew to Black Hill, a *koppie* behind the institution, whereupon the police contingent, now bolstered by white members of the Lovedale staff, as well as by white civilians from the nearby town,

²⁶ Letter from Stubbs to Winburg Magistrate, dated 7 July 1941; N.A.S. 3/4/1, N.M.C. 43.

²⁷ Letter from Leballo to Governor-General's War Fund, dated 28 April 1941; N.A.S. 3/4/2 N.H.C.I.

threw a cordon around the rioters and waited out the night. At dawn 157 students were arrested and marched to the Alice jail.²⁸

On the Saturday after the riots, the rest of the student body marched on Alice to visit their imprisoned classmates, against the orders of the Principal, Reverend R. W. Shepherd. On Sunday, church services were boycotted, and that evening stones were again thrown. A letter of defiance was handed to Shepherd in which it was stated that classes would be boycotted indefinitely by 'the unanimous decision of the majority of the students of Lovedale Boys Boarding Department'. Still very much tied to the 'civilised' conventions instilled in them by the institution that their contemporaries had tried to reduce to ashes, they conclude the letter with 'We beg to be yours obediently, THE STUDENTS'.²⁹

On Monday only 30 attended classes out of a total of 612, whereupon the authorities decided to close Lovedale forthwith. An announcement to that effect was greeted with applause when read by Shepherd in both the male and female dining halls, and the College did not reopen for a full nine weeks.

A few days after the riots the 157 imprisoned students appeared in the Alice municipal court, where all but five were found guilty of public violence: 84 under the age of 19 were sentenced to receive cuts with a light cane, while the remainder were fined £5 each, with the alternative of two months in prison.³⁰ That, however, was only the beginning of the punitive action taken against the students. In their letter to Shepherd they had expressed 'their unanimous opinion that after a verdict has been given by the legal court, Lovedale must not give them a double punishment'. The institution paid them scant attention. There were hardly any calls for tolerance and forgiveness. Recrimination was the order of the day.

After a specially appointed disciplinary committee had investigated all the cases individually, the Senate responded to its recommendations by planning to expel 197 students, almost one-third of the entire enrolment. This prompted the convening of an extraordinary meeting of Lovedale's Governing Council, chaired by the Principal of Fort Hare College, Dr Alexander Kerr. Since strong exception had been taken to the recommendations of the disciplinary committee, Kerr wrote a private letter to Shepherd in which he pointed out that 'It was unlikely that 197 students who had been admitted with good records in January

²⁸ See Lovedale documentation, Cory Library, Grahamstown, MS 16453 A(1).

²⁹ Letter from Students to Principal of Lovedale College; *ibid.* B(2).

³⁰ *Ibid.* A(2).

had become so vicious by August as to justify permanent expulsion from the institution.³¹ The Governing Council accordingly instructed the Senate to change its approach from 'maximum exclusion to a policy of maximum re-admission', and Kerr stressed the point that in his opinion this was 'more in consonance with the traditions of Lovedale and the spirit of a missionary institution'. After lengthy protestations, and even longer deliberations, the Senate managed to reduce the number of expulsions to 87, leaving the Governing Council satisfied that the traditions of Lovedale had been maintained.

UNSUCCESSFUL CORRESPONDENCE

One of the 87 was Leballo. Although charges were never brought against him, and proof of his involvement as a 'ringleader' was at best inconclusive, Leballo was singled out for punishment from the very outset. In response to the hostile attitude of the Lovedale authorities, Leballo engaged the Principal in a fascinating correspondence that stemmed from the questionnaire all students had been asked to complete as a precondition for readmission. Enclosed in a bulky envelope, which bore the post-mark of Lady Selborne, near Pretoria, together with the questionnaire which was virtually unanswered, was a short letter from Leballo, dated 2 September 1946, that optimistically concluded: 'Looking forward to our re-opening date'.³²

By the time this arrived on Shepherd's desk, however, the completed questionnaires from some of the more compliant students had begun to yield some confessions and disclosures, although most, like Leballo's, had been returned either unanswered or with painstakingly obtuse and intentionally non-incriminating replies. Indeed, the similarity of the responses suggests that there had been some elaborate planning behind the strikes.³³ Those involved had anticipated that the Lovedale authorities would apply considerable pressure on students in order to uncover, and if necessary create, 'ringleaders', thereby shifting the focus away from the need to address legitimate grievances. The prime motivators behind the riots had only one response to this predictable tactic: they warned students that the cost of collaboration would be injury or death.

For some the threat of physical violence from fellow students was less

³¹ Letter from Kerr to Shepherd, dated 17 December 1946; *ibid.* A(5).

³² Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 2 September 1946; *ibid.* A(2).

³³ *Ibid.* At least a hundred of the questionnaires have been preserved in this collection, with not a scrap of incriminating evidence in any of them.

intimidating than the fear of expulsion from Lovedale. This would appear to be what motivated, for example, June Phuti, to write from her home in Middelburg, Cape Province, not only implicating several male students, but also claiming that some of them were 'armed with loaded revolvers'.³⁴ Evidently the rioters were equipped with the wherewithal to back up their threats. In other cases, parental pressures, combined with the internalised cultural obsessions about education, were enough to convince some students to inform on others. It was at his father's insistence that Titus Maqubela provided Shepherd with enough circumstantial evidence with which to be convinced that Leballo had been one of the ringleaders. It was alleged that he had gone round to all the dormitories on the night of the riots, calling students to assemble for a public meeting, and that only a few hours before the actual outbreak of the disturbances he had 'made a strong speech in regard to starvation prevailing in the dining hall and the incapability of our S.R.C.' Maqubela claimed that Leballo had repeated this oration not only in every dormitory, but also 'in corridors and even in the dining hall'. He had prevailed upon students to give practical expression to their grievances: 'Many hours will pass, gentlemen, on strike', he asserted, 'Passive resistance will not help us. Don't be cowards.'³⁵

In other instances, loyalty to white authority was so deeply ingrained that collaboration was voluntary. This was the case with Ivan Bokwe, chairman of the Lovedale Student Representative Council, son of a teacher and brother-in-law of Z. K. Matthews. In an interview held with Shepherd shortly after the riots, Bokwe stated that at a meeting chaired by himself, Andrew Maroetsele, Ebenezer Malie, and Potlako had spoken passionately against conditions at the institution, especially in regard to the shocking quality of the food, and the arrogant and authoritarian attitude of the authorities. Interestingly enough the three men identified had all enlisted in the Native Military Corps during the war.³⁶

Leballo and his fellow ex-servicemen were probably well aware of the important changes taking place in Europe and North America in the wake of the fighting just ended, including the tacit acknowledgement in the Atlantic Charter that the process of decolonisation could no longer be retarded, except at staggering political and economic costs. This had a profound impact on aspirant élites in a number of colonial

³⁴ Letter from June Phuti to Shepherd, dated 19 August 1946; *ibid.* B(2).

³⁵ Letter from Titus Maqubela to Shepherd, dated 21 August 1946; *ibid.* K.

³⁶ Shepherd's own notes of interview with Bokwe; *ibid.* A(3).

situations. In South Africa this found clearest expression in the drafting by the African National Congress, at the instigation of the organisation's Youth League, of 'African Claims', a bill of rights based on the third article of the Atlantic Charter.

By rejecting the policy of racial segregation out of hand, 'African Claims' was a reflection of the growing orientation of organised resistance towards confrontation instead of co-operation. Far from being a 'democratisation of African consciousness', this new commitment to non-collaboration, passive resistance, and civil disobedience on the part of young activists was a response by self-styled leaders to more aggressive actions by a post-war generation of Africans to social crises. The Lovedale riots were a direct and practical rejection of the clientelism which was the basis for the white liberal establishment's appeal for African support.

The fact that the Africanist polemic of the A.N.C. Youth League was premised on an attack against white liberal trusteeship does not show that the students had rioted because their consciousness had been awoken by the organisations which claimed to lead them. Suggestions that there was a branch of the Youth League at Lovedale College, and that Leballo had been its founder, are entirely spurious. The deep antipathy towards the patronising attitudes of white liberals was a consciousness gained principally by direct experience, not by indoctrination or by reading.

The important point about white liberals is that their attentions to the 'natives' were class-specific. The failures as well as the successes of their policies had direct relevance for only a small privileged stratum of African society. What made the criticism of trusteeship appeal to others, besides those who benefited from its efforts and suffered because of its severe limitations, was the richly populist form of the growing attack. This was not the result of intentional political manoeuvring by a sophisticated African petty-bourgeoisie. Rather it was the immediate consequence of this social class having to endure similar material hardships to those experienced by African under-classes because of the strong racial character of South African capitalism.

Lying Low in Lady Selborne

Leballo was no stranger to material deprivation. In fact, the riots at Lovedale had been triggered in part by the poor diets provided by the College. During the mid-1940s, scholars at the boarding institutions in the Eastern Cape had good reason to differ with Sol Plaatje's assertion

that the people on the Lovedale estate were 'well-fed and well cared for'.³⁷ Because of commodity scarcities in the wake of World War II, exacerbated by the most severe drought in the region in decades, the missionary schools experienced a serious shortage of food. Although certainly better-off than the rural communities that surrounded Lovedale, where malnutrition among children was widespread, and where almost 50,000 head of cattle had been lost during the drought months of 1945, the College had to extend the winter vacation of 1946 by one week because of chronic food shortages.³⁸

Major subsistence problems were not confined to the countryside. The rapid urbanisation of the 1940s had created acute stresses and strains in the cities as well. The shortage of housing, the difficulty for exploited labourers to subsist on paltry wages, and the high level of unemployment were just a few of the factors that contributed to the mushrooming of slums and the spawning of squatter communities. It was into this maelstrom that Leballo disappeared after he had been suspended from Lovedale. More fortunate than many, he was able to move into a tiny house in Lady Selborne that was being rented by some of his relatives. Isolated in this freehold township near Pretoria, unable to communicate with his peers except by letter, and without influential parents to motivate for his re-admission, Leballo had to pin his hopes on his own ability to persuade the College to lift his suspension.

As the end of September approached, Leballo visited the Pretoria offices of the Union Education Department, which was responsible for making the payments of his army subsistence allowance, having optimistically assumed that if he appeared in person the staff there would pay him directly without consulting the Lovedale authorities. Although the Department's functionaries refused to do this, Leballo did not leave the building empty-handed. He was given a form for the Rev. Shepherd's 'perusal and signature', which he forwarded to Lovedale with a covering letter in which he pointed out that 'In the course of my training in the College and my holidays at any time I am still entitled to my subsistence allowance payable to me every month by Union Education Department'³⁹ Leballo ended by asking the Principal for his 'kind assistance' which would be 'very much appreciated'. It is clear he was still hoping that those at the College who held his future in their hands would act in the spirit of tolerance and fair-play that they sanctimoniously espoused.

³⁷ Sol Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1982), p. 136.

³⁸ *South African Outlook* (Lovedale), October 1945.

³⁹ Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 28 September 1946; MS 16453 A(2).

Leballo's letter was read by the head of the teachers training school, J. W. Macquarrie, who 'took much interest' in Leballo and 'placed great reliance on him' because they had both served in the North African campaign. In what was almost certainly a case of familiarity having caused contempt, Macquarrie advised Shepherd to return the form unsigned to the Secretary for Education, and this was duly done. Leballo may or may not have heard that other students were being recalled, but in the absence of any reply from the College during the next 10 days it is not surprising that the Principal was sent a telegram on 8 October, apparently by Leballo's mother: 'Kitchener still awaiting re-opening date to return. Please advise.'⁴⁰

Double Cross

The next day the Reverend Shepherd made written contact with Leballo for the first time:

Lovedale re-opened today, and all students who were eligible to return were informed, and re-called. All other students will be informed shortly of the decision of the Senate.⁴¹

Although Leballo must have suspected that his status at Lovedale had been placed in jeopardy by his involvement in the disturbances, he had evidently been deluding himself if he thought that his activities had gone undetected. Never one to relinquish a misapprehension in a hurry, Leballo began to construct his self-defence around a plaintive plea of innocence. However naïve this might appear in the light of the evidence that had been amassed against him, this tactic indicates that Leballo was sufficiently well acquainted with the moral priorities of the white Christians at Lovedale to guess that protestations of innocence were more likely to receive a sympathetic hearing than an admission of guilt, especially if accompanied by evidence that would incriminate his accomplices.

By 19 October, Leballo had decided that the new canons of passive resistance and defiance to white authority were not as compelling as the western use-values of education and subsistence allowances. The immediate relevance of the latter to the father of young infants who depended on the College and the Government for his immediate income, as well as his long-term prospects, could not have been lost on Shepherd. Hoping to arouse the Principal's sympathy, Leballo made a point of reminding him that:

⁴⁰ Unsigned telegram to Principal of Lovedale, dated 8 October 1946; *ibid.*

⁴¹ Letter from Shepherd to Leballo, dated 9 October 1946; *ibid.*

I have been granted financial assistance as an ex-volunteer to further my studies at this institution for which I feel if I am refused to return back I shall have sustained a great loss.⁴²

Clearly overcome by the anxiety and regret of having jeopardised so much, Leballo felt that the best way to maximise his chance for readmission was to give Shepherd the information he had demanded in the questionnaire. In a 12-point betrayal he divulged some of the names of those students who had incited the rioting, those who had been armed with revolvers, those who had organised the march on the town of Alice, and those who had sent threats to Shepherd.

The extent to which Leballo remained betrothed to white liberal paternalism and its material fruits is evident in the interesting choice of metaphor in his letter of betrayal. It is to provocative protestant phraseology, heavy with inferences of damnation, that he turned in order to underscore his fidelity to the white authorities who were intent on rustivating him. After having reasserted that he had in no way been involved in the disturbances, Leballo went on to explain that his damning evidence had been acquired at student meetings which he had assumed to be legal:

I beg to greatly apologise for having associated with these meetings... but at that particular time Satan defeated me unconditionally. But from now on I swear that I shall never be defeated by evil spirits and temptations. I am sure my prayer shall be my greatest weapon of all time to conquer evil things.⁴³

No doubt the Principal did not approve of the way in which Leballo was miming the homilies he had been exposed to at Lovedale on a daily basis. In all likelihood it added to his disdain. While Shepherd may have been proud of the way in which he had pressurised the students to inform on their colleagues, there is no doubt that for some of those who succumbed he had nothing but contempt. In any case he did not bother to reply to Leballo.

This was to mark a turning point in Leballo's approach to the Principal, and perhaps to white liberals in general. The three months that had passed since his dismissal from Lovedale had been emotionally turbulent, not least because he had been 'inside' two, albeit very different, white institutions for most of his adult life. His initiation into the African urban world, with its new sets of material hardships and its stinging disappointments, affected him profoundly. Kicking his heels in the overcrowded urban home of his relatives, burdening them with his subsistence, Leballo must have had ample time to muse upon the cruel

⁴² Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 19 October 1946; *ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

joke that history was playing on him, and on members of his social class throughout South Africa. However mediocre might be the opportunities for an African teacher, they were immeasurably superior to those of an unskilled, de-ruralised African city-dweller.

With each passing week Leballo's anxiety rose. The pinch of being without an income was exacerbated by growing uncertainty about his future. The end of 1946 was approaching; if he did not sit for examinations not only would an entire year have been wasted, but he would not become a qualified teacher. When Leballo wrote again to Shepherd on 5 November, there was a definite edge of anger to his words, and also a sense of deepening agitation:

It is very unfair and injustice when obligations of my education etc. are not fulfilled, and that I cause other expenditure as I did from August up to now in my home, yet money for my fees has been paid...and my parents are already in difficulties of finance caused by authorities...The examination is drawing nearer every day. We do not know where we are and we are still cramming.⁴⁴

After again protesting his innocence, although this time with more self-assertion – 'my name, conduct, character have never been spoiled or defamed' – Leballo then committed the tactical error that, as the constructor of a well-considered alibi, he had thus far studiously avoided. He insisted that two African members of Lovedale's teaching staff, Messrs Matlhare and Makalima, could vouch for his innocence since he had been in their company for the duration of the first night's rioting.

Within hours of receiving Leballo's letter the Principal had a private conversation with Makalima, the contents of which, recorded in Shepherd's own handwriting, inspired his longest reply. After making passing reference to the evidence incriminating others which Leballo had provided, Shephard went on to write:

Amid much evidence that is still coming in, is the important fact that while you say that when the rioting broke out you ran from your dormitory and immediately took cover at the teacher's cottage occupied by Mr Matlhare and Mr Makalima and stayed there until the fighting of the riot was over, Mr Makalima utterly denies this and declares that you...came there after it was all over.⁴⁵

For most people in such a situation any remaining hopes for readmission to Lovedale, and the attendant rite of passage into the African intelligentsia, would have disintegrated. But Leballo was gifted with a

⁴⁴ Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 5 November 1946; *ibid.* A(3).

⁴⁵ Letter from Shepherd to Leballo, dated 7 November 1946; *ibid.*

thick-skinned tenacity, and within days his reply was on its way to Alice.

Since it was impossible to retract his claim that he had been with Makalima and Matlhare, or to try to cast doubt on the validity of the rejoinder extracted by Shepherd, Leballo had to seek a more subtle defence. 'Mr. Makalima's statements are not entirely contradictory to mine', he wrote, before pointing out that his dormitory was one of the last buildings to be stoned, and that he was one of the last students to leave.⁴⁶ This kind of circumstantial counter-argument might have received a sympathetic hearing from an impartial inquiry, but from Shepherd and his disciplinary committee it was rejected out of hand, reaffirming the arbitrary and authoritarian manner in which the Lovedale authorities handled the crisis. The information extracted from the questionnaires, the interviews, and the letters from unsuspecting or compromised students was regarded as sufficient evidence on which to decide on dismissals. The students had neither the means nor the opportunity to familiarise themselves with accusations and to answer them.

As Leballo's brash self-assurance got whittled away by gnawing anxieties about money and career opportunities, he began to discern Shepherd's tactics and the extent to which he had fallen victim to them. Shock exceeded outrage as Leballo realised that the Principal of Lovedale had no intention of rewarding his duplicity with readmission. 'This kind of answer from you, sir', he asked Shepherd, 'is that what every student must expect if he reveals any information?'.⁴⁷

At the beginning of December 1946, Leballo was finally informed of bureaucratic decisions that had been made without his knowledge, and which seriously jeopardised his material predicament. In a curt memorandum, Shepherd explained that a cheque made out in Leballo's favour had been returned to the Governor-General's War Fund, that the form from the Union Education Department had been returned unsigned, that no arrangements had been made for him to sit examinations that year, and that the Discipline Committee had recommended to the Senate that he should not be allowed to return to Lovedale.⁴⁸

Shepherd had been left unmoved by Leballo's pleas of innocence, betrayals of fellow-students, outbursts of anger, and hints of dismay at being deceived. Appeals for mercy and acts of duplicity having failed

⁴⁶ Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 19 November 1946; *ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Memorandum from Shepherd to Leballo, dated 2 December 1946; *ibid.* A(5).

to secure a readmission, Leballo was down to exercising his last option. For other students an admission of guilt would have come earlier – certainly before giving evidence against friends – but not for someone as opinionated and bombastic as Leballo. Drawing heavily on his Anglican background, and at the same time adopting a style that he thought might sway the sentiments of a religious man, he sat down on 18 December to write his last lengthy letter to Shepherd. Although once again insisting that he had not been involved at all in the rioting on the night of 7 August, Leballo sensed it was expedient to acknowledge some complicity in the riots.

I strongly appeal to you as my principal, my minister of religion as well as my father in God for mercy and forgiveness...I have already suffered the punishment imposed on me for lossing [*sic*] my classes, my examinations and fees, these are really severe. Should I not have been mislead I could have defeated these temptations. Therefore I truly ask forgiveness. I have done this once and for the first time and I shall never do it again... You are my father in Christ and I humbly ask you to be mercy [*sic*]. I am your son. I did wrong things against you and the people and it is even a disgrace to talk about the strike which was done deliberately and without reasons...⁴⁹

The Reverend Shepherd had secured another confession. But instead of accepting it in good faith as Leballo must have hoped, the Principal was to use it against him.

Placing Difficulties in Leballo's Way

In the meantime Leballo had managed to find a job as a temporary teacher at a school attached to the Anglican mission in Lady Selborne. It was here that he first came into contact with the Reverend John Arthur Arrowsmith-Maund, who he was to accuse a few years later of fathering a child by an African school teacher. Although the Anglican authorities did not take the charge seriously, the matter gained enough prominence in the early 1950s to catapult Leballo into the political limelight for the first time.⁵⁰ Given the severity of his conflicts with two prominent Anglican ministers and, on both occasions, the off-hand manner in which his point of view was dismissed by paternalistic institutions, it is not surprising that Leballo later became an impassioned opponent to co-operation between African nationalists and white radicals.

In May 1947 the Reverend Shepherd went on leave from Lovedale,

⁴⁹ Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 18 December 1986; *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Interview with Godfrey Pitje, November 1988.

and it transpired that the Acting Principal, O. B. Bull, who had been the Director of Education in Basutoland in the late 1930s, remembered having received good reports about Leballo's work as a very young and unqualified teacher at Masite. Believing that there were at least some grounds for optimism, Leballo wrote to Bull on 14 May asking to be considered for readmission, as well as requesting a testimonial, since neither Shepherd nor Macquarrie had sent him one. As it turned out, the Senate reached its final decision about permanent exclusions during Bull's brief tenure. Accordingly on 23 June, almost 11 months after the disturbances, the following memorandum, signed by Bull instead of Shepherd, was forwarded to Leballo:

Further to the correspondence which has passed in regard to yourself and your conduct here last year, I regret to have to inform you that the decision of the Lovedale Governing Council is that you cannot be re-admitted to Lovedale. Should you wish to enter another institution and its principal be willing to accept you after referring the application to this office, we shall not put any difficulties in your way.⁵¹

Leballo was to write one final letter to Lovedale. This was in October 1947, when he applied to be readmitted the following calendar year. One paragraph in particular warrants quoting, since it shows how Leballo's dismissal from Lovedale had repercussions that went beyond the eventual expulsion:

I am suffering educationally a great deal. Wherever I applied for admission my application was refused. I have applied to seven schools without success. Whenever I tell or mention the truth in my application that I am an ex-student of Lovedale who took part in the riot of 1946... my application is turned down.⁵²

At the foot of the page, in Shepherd's distinctive scrawl, were the telling words: 'Take no notice of this'. No doubt the Principal would have adhered to his own injunction had Leballo not managed eventually to secure a position for himself at the Wilberforce Institute of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Evaton, Transvaal. Once accepted at another educational establishment, Leballo wrote to the Government requesting that the unexpended balance of his grant of £100 be reinstated. The Directorate of Demobilisation referred the matter to the Reverend Shepherd, pointing out that they were inclined to consider Leballo's application favourably.⁵³

⁵¹ Memorandum from Bull to Leballo, dated 23 June 1947; MS 16453 A(6).

⁵² Letter from Leballo to Shepherd, dated 18 October 1947; *ibid.*

⁵³ Letter from Director-General of Demobilisation to the Principal of Lovedale Missionary Institution, dated 30 March 1948; *ibid.* A(7).

Judging from the content of the Principal's reply in April 1948, he simply ignored the fact that the expulsion notices to all the students allegedly involved in the riots included a guarantee that Lovedale would not put any difficulties in their way should they be accepted at another school. After stating self-righteously that 'We have no wish to ruin this man's career for all time', Shepherd continued:

But in view of his leadership in subversive activities here and the way in which he caused others younger than himself to take the courses most harmful to themselves I think it would be wrong to deal generously with him in financial matters.⁵⁴

It was not long before Leballo was causing enough anxieties for his new Principal, B. Rajuli, to write to Shepherd on 14 April as follows:

re K. Leballo. A very bad student indeed!!! He and a few others have worked our Institute into a most unfortunate kind of a strike – a passive sit-down kind of a strike.⁵⁵

Although the boarding conditions and attitudes of some staff at A. M. E. Wilberforce closely resembled those of the Anglican Lovedale, it seems obvious that Shepherd's treatment of Leballo must have intensified his disdain for authority.



What we witness in Leballo's correspondence are fabrications, pleadings, threats, and betrayals. The psychopathy of later years already rears its head. Especially when we see him cold-heartedly betray his comrades we get a premonition of the debacle of his press conference at Maseru in 1963.⁵⁶ Everywhere there are tell-tale signs of the loquaciousness and the psychic swagger that cost the P.A.C. in exile so dearly. But at the same time there are clear indications of his powers of oratory, of his persistence, and his energy. These are aspects of Leballo's individual psychology, and can only be related imprecisely to the realities of the social order in which his *persona* evolved and, in response to varying social stimuli, underwent constant changes.

⁵⁴ Letter from Shepherd to Director-General of Demobilisation, dated 5 April 1948; *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Letter from Rajuli to Shepherd, dated 14 April 1948; *ibid.*

⁵⁶ It was on this occasion that Leballo, in an act of bravado, warned the South African Government that hundreds of thousands of P.A.C.-trained militants were going to stage a bloody insurrection, and that they were awaiting his order to 'deliver the blow'. Leballo's folly triggered a nationwide crackdown that resulted in thousands of arbitrary arrests. See Tom Lodge, *Insurrection in South Africa: the Pan-Africanist Congress and the Poqo movement, 1959-1965*, Ph.D. thesis, p. 296.

What is clear from the sequence of events which have been outlined above is that Leballo's negative characteristics, as well as his considerable political attributes – notably his antipathy towards authority, his natural taste for subversion, his considerable powers of persuasion – were all ways in which this young man orientated himself towards the material exigencies of his daily life. And the most pressing motivation for Leballo and for many Africans of similar social and economic standing was to vigorously defend their petty-bourgeois status. The repressive conditions that this social class had to endure because of race capitalism guaranteed that this resilience often spilled into overt resistance. As soon as the options to escape proletarianisation began to close, this class was faced with one of two choices – either to capitulate or to resist. Although most of them chose resistance at some stage in their lives, they also seized the opportunity to seek accommodation with the social forces that threatened their status, either when the options to escape proletarianisation began to open again, or when resistance seemed to offer fewer material rewards than compromise. In Leballo's case it was the latter exigency that prompted him to engage the Reverend Shepherd in lengthy correspondence.

The cliché which likens life to a drama evokes a fact so obvious as to need no discussion. There is widespread confusion between play-acting and real life. In the arena of political protest it is the demagogues, in particular, who fuse organised appearances with real life. They reify lived experience at the same time that they give it popular expression. It was primarily as an orator that Potlako Leballo was to achieve political prominence. His talent for manipulating language and dramatising actual events earned him – and eventually lost him – the leadership of the P.A.C. It is therefore appropriate for a social historian to stack his frequently manufactured achievements against the real experiences of common people. In the process one is able to show that in order to become great men or women, leaders frequently step beyond, and stoop below, the reality of the smallest individual life.