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WALTER SISULU

by

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(Written for his 75th birthday on May 18, 1987)

As international attention has rightly been focussed on Nelson Mandela as the symbol of South African resistance, other eminent leaders of the freedom movement languishing in apartheid prisons are little known around the world.

Among them the most deserving of respect is Walter Max Ulyate Sisulu, a mentor of Nelson Mandela in his youth, the Secretary-General of the African National Congress from 1949 to 1954 and the organizational genius of ANC. He was the moving spirit behind all the great campaigns in the 1950`s, as well as the transformation of the ANC in 1960-61 for underground work and armed struggle.

The development of the ANC into a mass movement may be traced to the establishment of the ANC Youth League in 1944. The Youth League advocated militant action - including boycotts, strikes and civil disobedience - for freedom from white domination and the attainment of political independence. It was in tune with the popular upsurge during and after the Second World War. At the ANC Congress in 1949, it secured endorsement of its "positive action programme" and had its slate of officers elected. Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela were members of the Youth League who have played the leading role in the struggle for liberation since then.

Walter Sisulu was the Treasurer of the Youth League and it was in his office that the members met to discuss strategy and tactics of the struggle. He became the first full-time Secretary-General of the ANC in 1949,

Born in Engcobo, Transkei, on May 18, 1912, the year that the ANC was founded, he had to leave school after Standard 4. He worked underground in the gold mines on the Reef, as a "kitchen boy" for a white family in East London and then in a bakery in Johannesburg. He was sacked for leading a strike at the bakery.

As he went from job to job, he continued studies on his own and wrote articles for the *Bantu World* on African heroes. He managed to set up a small business as estate agent in the little freehold land that Africans were allowed to own in

Johannesburg, and joined the ANC in 1940.

A year before his election as Secretary-General of the ANC, the National Party came to power, with apartheid as its policy, and enacted a series of repressive measures. The African, Indian and Coloured people had become militant and there was a growing urge for unity. They saw that the regime's repressive laws, ostensibly directed against the Communist Party, were in fact intended to suppress all struggles for freedom and equality.

Walter plunged into organizing mass action in implementation of the new ANC programme. The ANC, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), the African People's Organization (mainly an organization of Coloured people) and the Communist Party called for demonstrations, on May Day 1950, for the repeal of all discriminatory laws and for full franchise for all the people. The demonstrations were a great success, with 80 percent of the workers on the Witwatersrand going on strike. Police resorted to shooting in the evening: 18 Africans were killed and many injured.

The organizations then called for a National Day of Protest on June 26 - a date which became the South Africa Freedom Day. Again the demonstrations all over the country were impressive. It was estimated that 50 percent of the workers joined the national work stoppage.

Then, after extensive preparation, the ANC and SAIC, with the support of other organizations, launched the Campaign of Defiance against Unjust Laws on June 26, 1952.

Walter Sisulu was in the Joint Planning Council of the campaign, together with Dr. J.S. Moroka and J.B. Marks of ANC and Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and Mr. Yusuf Cachalia of SAIC. Nelson Mandela was appointed Volunteer-in-Chief and demonstrated his great qualities of leadership.

Over 8,000 people of all racial origins from all parts of the country went to jail defying a series of discriminatory laws. Walter Sisulu was arrested when he entered an African location in a group of volunteers led by Nana Sita, a respected Gandhian. He told the court before he was sentenced:

"I wish to make this solemn vow and in full appreciation of the consequences it entails. As long as I enjoy the confidence of my people, and as long as there is a spark of life and energy in me, I shall fight with courage and determination for the abolition of discriminatory laws and for the freedom of all South Africans irrespective of colour or creed."

After the suspension of the Defiance Campaign, he went

abroad in 1953, on his only visit outside South Africa, to attend the World Festival of Youth and Students in Bucharest and toured some countries in Europe and Asia.

On his return, he was served with a series of ever more stringent restriction orders and was arrested numerous times. He was forced in 1954 to give up his office as Secretary-General of ANC. He was one of the principal accused in the treason trial which dragged on from December 1956 to March 1961 and was detained for five months during the State of Emergency in 1960. He was arrested six times in 1962.

But he could not be immobilized. He was behind every campaign of the ANC, often working clandestinely. He attended the meeting of the ANC leaders in Botswana (then Bechuanaland) in 1961 which decided on an armed struggle and the organization of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* ("Spear of the Nation"), a military wing. He helped organize *Umkhonto* and set up regional commands as its Political Commissioner.

Repression increased as *Umkhonto* mounted scores of acts of sabotage all over the country from December 16, 1961.

Walter was placed under virtual house arrest in 1962. He was charged with incitement of the May 1961 strike against the proclamation of a white racist Republic and with promoting the aims of the ANC after it was outlawed in 1960. He was sentenced to six years' imprisonment, but released on bail pending appeal, he went underground. On June 26, 1963, broadcast a message to his people from a secret radio transmitter, calling for united action and new forms of struggle to overthrow the apartheid regime.

A few days later, on July 11, Walter and other leaders were arrested at their secret headquarters in Rivonia. They were charged, along with Nelson Mandela who was already in prison, and sentenced in June 1964 to life imprisonment.

Reports from prison indicate that 23 years of confinement have not shaken the faith and spirit of Walter Sisulu. They continue to inspire his colleagues in prison and the people outside.

As inspiring as his own life is the steadfastness and sacrifice of his family in the freedom struggle.

Walter and Albertina, a nurse, were married in 1944. At the wedding, Nelson Mandela was his best man. The Chairman of the Youth League, the late Anton Lembede, warned the bride: "You are marrying a man who is already married to the nation." As Walter dedicated his life to the liberation struggle, it was Albertina who supported the family from 1949 - raising their five children as well as two children of her deceased sister. They have had hardly four or five years of

normal married life.

Mrs. Albertina Notsikelelo Sisulu has also been active in the freedom struggle, becoming a symbol of courage and determination and is acclaimed by the people as "mother of the nation."

She joined the ANC Women's League in the 1940's and was elected its Treasurer in 1959. She was an executive member of the multi-racial Federation of South African Women when it was established in 1954, and was elected its Transvaal President in 1963 and national President recently. She was arrested in October 1958 in a demonstration of women in Johannesburg against pass laws.

In 1963, she and her 17-year-old son, Max, were detained for several months and held in solitary confinement as the Security Police tried to extract information on the whereabouts of Walter who had gone underground.

She was restricted under banning orders for 17 years from 1964 to 1981; for ten years she was confined to her home during nights and weekends and prohibited from receiving visitors. When the banning orders expired at the end of July 1981, she began speaking all over the country demanding the release of political prisoners and an end to repression. She was again banned, from January 1982 to July 1983, from attending any public meetings.

She was arrested in July 1983 and charged with furthering the aims of the ANC by singing ANC songs at the funeral of a leader of the Federation of Women. While in jail, she was elected Transvaal President of the newly-formed United Democratic Front and then Co-President of the national UDF. She was sentenced early in 1984 to four years in prison. While on bail pending appeal, she was arrested again in December 1984 and charged with treason. (One of her co-accused, Mewalal Ramgobin, is a member of the Gandhi family: his wife is the granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi). The charges were dropped after she spent several months in prison.

Her eldest son, Max, fled from the country after detention in 1963 for further studies and continues to work with the ANC external mission and other organizations.

Her second son, Mlungisi, was detained for two weeks in August 1984, during the elections for the segregated chambers of "Parliament" for the Coloured people and Indians, when there was a national protest by all the black people.

Her youngest son, Zwelekhe, became a prominent black journalist and was elected President of the Media Workers' Association of South Africa in 1981. He was soon prohibited from working as a journalist and from union activities, and

then detained for 251 days until February 1982 without any charges.

He was a Nieman fellow at Harvard University in the United States in 1985-86. After return to South Africa he was again detained under the latest State of Emergency and is still in jail.

Lindiwe, older of the two daughters of Walter and Albertina, was detained after the Soweto massacre in 1976 when she came home on holidays from her university in Lesotho. She was held for eleven months and tortured. She left the country after release to work in the ANC external mission.

Undeterred by all this persecution, Walter and Albertina Sisulu, and their children, fight on with determination and unshakeable faith in the liberation of South Africa. They, and many others like them, look to the world for genuine and effective solidarity at this critical time.

Those who wish to write to the Sisulu family may address their letters to:

Walter Sisulu
Pollsmoor Maximum Prison
Private bag X-4,
Toka 7966, South Africa

or

Mrs. Albertina Sisulu
7372 Orlando West
P.O. Phirinia
Johannesburg, South Africa.

(Note: Mr. Reddy is former Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and head of its Centre against Apartheid).