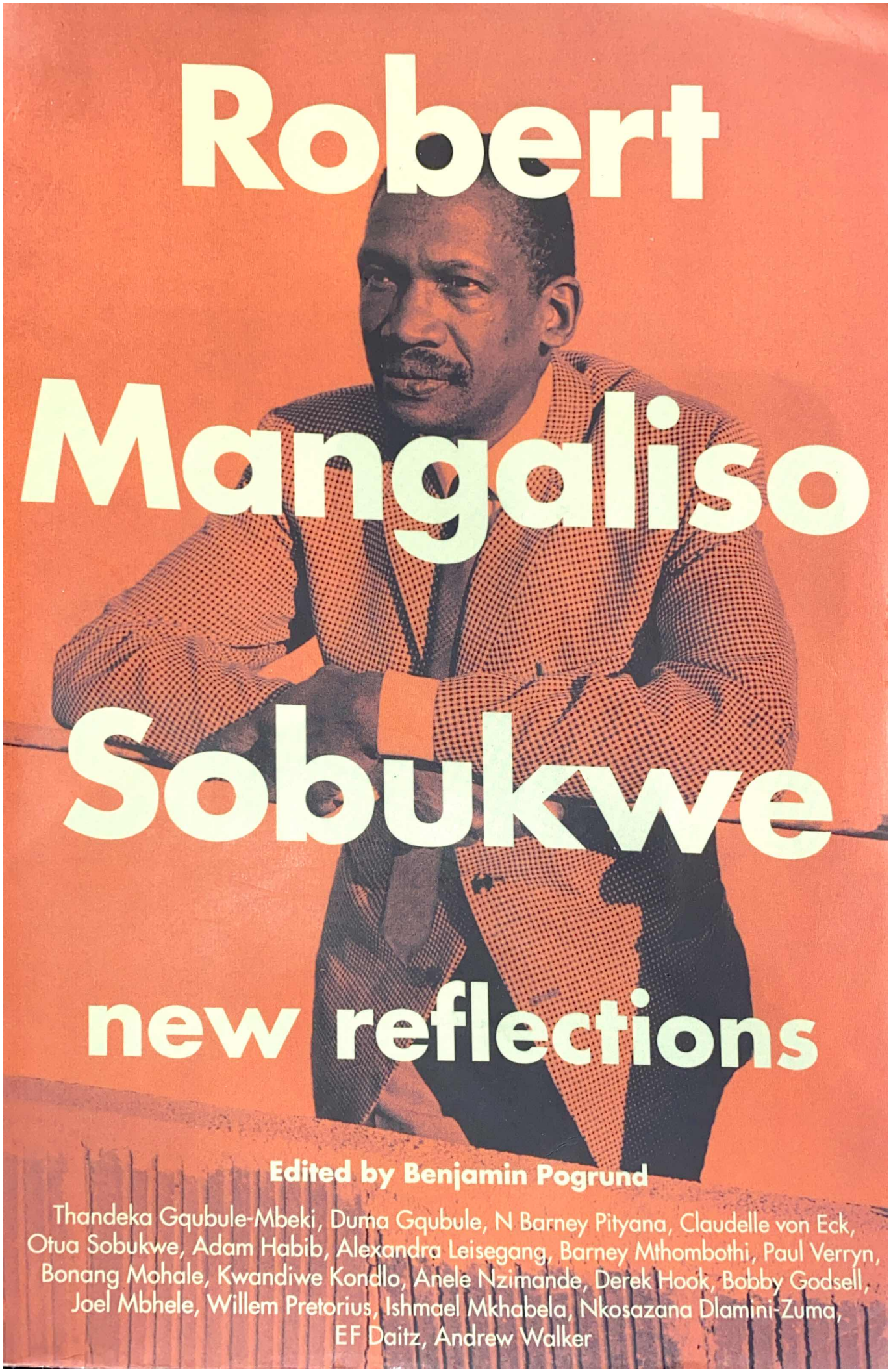
Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe



new reflections

Edited by Benjamin Pogrund

Thandeka Gqubule-Mbeki, Duma Gqubule, N Barney Pityana, Claudelle von Eck, Otua Sobukwe, Adam Habib, Alexandra Leisegang, Barney Mthombothi, Paul Verryn, Bonang Mohale, Kwandiwe Kondlo, Anele Nzimande, Derek Hook, Bobby Godsell, Joel Mbhele, Willem Pretorius, Ishmael Mkhabela, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, EF Daitz, Andrew Walker

Getting to know his true grace

Andrew Walker

Andrew Walker was raised and educated in the New England region of the United States and attended university at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He has spent his 30-year career in the field of international human resources, and is presently the global head of remuneration and employee mobility for Ernst & Young, based in New York City.

WHILE ATTENDING UNIVERSITY in the US at a small New England liberal arts college in the late 1980s, I witnessed the increasing activism among students opposing the apartheid regime. Even on my little campus a mock shantytown was erected, with banners calling on US companies to divest from their South African business interests. Nelson Mandela was a household name, and support for ending the separatist policies seemed universal in my part of the world. Nevertheless, the details of what the opposition was doing within South Africa, and what was being done to the opposition, were almost entirely unknown to me.

Many years later, by then married with two small children, I was living in London as an expatriate. Perhaps the greatest perk of those years was access to other countries during holidays and school breaks. We covered a lot of ground in Western Europe and occasionally ventured further afield. I was nearing the end of my five-year secondment when we made our way to South Africa, a place I had for a long time hoped to visit.

For a variety of reasons, the African continent always had a

strong pull for me. As children, my cousins spent several summers in Central Africa accompanying their father, a professor of art history, who conducted academic research there. They shared amazing stories of what they saw and did. One cousin returned often to do aid work after finishing his university studies, and still does so today. In my childhood, the work of Jane Goodall, news about the Ethiopian famine, and photos of wildebeest, lion and zebra all filled me with awe and curiosity about Africa. In high school, I wrote a paper on the work of Alan Paton, reading *Cry, the Beloved Country*, which opened my eyes to the injustices of the apartheid government. Later, Mandela's release and ascension to the presidency filled me with respect, joy and hope. So, visiting Africa, and South Africa in particular, was near the top of my bucket list. In late 2008, I embarked for Cape Town with my wife, son and daughter.

We took in many of the famous sights: Table Mountain, the Cape of Good Hope, penguins at Boulders Beach, the V&A Waterfront and a wildlife preserve. I saved a visit to Robben Island for later in our trip. Although I expected it to be a highlight, I was wholly unprepared for the impact it would have on me, and the passion it would ignite.

The Robben Island tour included a guided walk through the prison compound, led by a former prisoner, and an opportunity to stand in Mandela's cell. Afterwards, we boarded a bus to see other buildings on the island, as well as the quarry where the prisoners worked. Our clever bus driver followed the designated route in reverse, to avoid getting caught in the queue of buses forming in the other direction. Near the end (normally the very beginning), he pulled over onto a small side road to avoid blocking oncoming traffic. We stopped in front of a collection of buildings set away from the main prison compound. Almost as an afterthought, while we waited for traffic to clear, our bus tour guide (not the former

prisoner who led our walking tour) casually pointed out the housing for the warders, the kennels for the island's guard dogs and the tiny cottage where Robert Sobukwe had been held in isolation far from the other prisoners. This remote spot was like an island within an island.

The name Sobukwe sounded vaguely familiar but I didn't know why. The bus tour guide, who was younger than the prison guide, explained briefly that Sobukwe was considered such a threat to the government that he was separated from all the other prisoners. He inaccurately described Sobukwe as a fierce militant who resorted to violent measures. I wondered how could I know nothing of this man who was considered such a threat to the apartheid regime that he was held away from the main prison. In fact, he was the *only* isolated prisoner on the island. Even Nelson Mandela, the face of the anti-apartheid movement to the world, was held with others, including his friends and associates. 'Who *was* Robert Sobukwe?' I asked myself.

Not much later, with the traffic jam over, we continued on our way. But the curiosity stayed with me. As we awaited the ferry back to the mainland, we browsed the island's gift shop, where I found Benjamin Pogrund's biography of Sobukwe, *How Can Man Die Better*, and brought a copy to the till. The clerk stamped the inside cover with the words, 'Bought at Robben Island Museum', and before long it would become not just one of my favourite *books*, but also one of my favorite possessions.

That night I flipped through it, looking at the photos and acquainting myself with the distinguished-looking gentleman who had so alarmed the South African government. He didn't look violent or even remotely threatening. Rather, he appeared academic and friendly. During the long flight back to London, I leafed through the pages (with frequent interruptions from my children). I continued reading it on the Tube during my commute to and

from work, and at night before bed. This was a book to be savoured, not quickly devoured, so I took my time and read it slowly. I was mesmerised by the life, hardship, courage, intellect and superhuman character – and, sadly, the death – of this rarest-of-rare human being. His story and his relationship with Pogrund held me rapt like no other book I've read. At some point midway through the book, the question I had asked myself during that fortuitous bus-tour traffic jam on Robben Island changed from 'How could I not know about this man?' to 'Why doesn't *everyone* know about Robert Sobukwe?'

Even before I finished the book, I felt compelled to talk about it to anyone and everyone. It bothered me that one of the museum's own tour guides so greatly misunderstood Sobukwe, and, what's worse, propagated that misunderstanding to many others who visited the island. Suddenly, it became my mission to make sure people not only knew of Sobukwe, but also knew what he stood for, and appreciated his critical role in the fight against the apartheid regime.

Unable to find the book in any bookshop outside South Africa, I ordered ten copies from the South African publisher. I distributed these to friends, family and other potentially sympathetic contacts, including the very pro-Africa chairman of the board of Reuters (today Thomson Reuters), where I worked at the time. My request to each recipient was twofold: 'Please read this book and *pass it along*.' Copies went to various cities in the US and to several places around London, but I daydreamed of ways to get it even broader attention.

Beyond the book, I also wanted to know more about the author, but there wasn't much information readily available about Benjamin Pogrund. The Wikipedia article was far too brief and I couldn't find him on LinkedIn or Facebook. Facebook did reveal another Pogrund named Jennie. I recalled one photo in the book of Benjamin's daughter sitting with Robert's children. Holding the photo in the book up to the computer screen, I compared

the young face to the Facebook profile picture and thought, *this could be her.* I sent her a friend request, asking if indeed she was Benjamin Pogrund's daughter. To my delight, she was, and we began a wonderful correspondence about Sobukwe, her father and her own experiences growing up in South Africa, where she lives today.

Jennie in turn introduced me to Benjamin himself, and to Sobukwe's son Dini, who worked so hard to preserve his father's legacy through the Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe Trust. I have enjoyed an irregular but ongoing correspondence with both, and I was thrilled to learn that Benjamin had told Robert's widow, Veronica, about me and my interest in their story. I often asked Dini how I could help with his Trust efforts and celebrated his successes in arranging exhibits to improve South Africans' awareness of his father, including one held on Robben Island. It was an honour and a privilege to be in contact with both of them.

Jennie and I eventually met when a business trip took me to Pretoria, where she lives, and it was thrilling not only to see my pen pal in person but also to make a physical connection to someone who had known Sobukwe in life. On several occasions, Benjamin and I narrowly missed being in the same city at the same time. Although a resident of Israel, at one point he attended an event *in my office building*, but I was away on a business trip at the time. We finally met in New York, where I am now based, when a book tour brought him to the city in 2016. He presented me with a signed copy of the third edition of *How Can Man Die Better*, which sits next to the original copy I bought on Robben Island, which he also signed for me that day.

At one point several years ago, I saw a comment posted on the Sobukwe group's Facebook page by a girl who wrote that she was Robert's granddaughter. I responded, commenting on how much I admired and respected her grandfather. Sometime later, I mentioned the exchange to Benjamin and he confirmed that he

knew her, Otua, the daughter of Robert's own daughter. Some years later, I heard from Otua out of the blue. She remembered me and wanted to tell me she planned to attend university in the US. It was so much fun for me to expand my Sobukwe pen pal group and we have stayed in touch, even meeting at Wellesley College, where she enrolled. Wellesley is one of the top colleges in the US, the alma mater of Hillary Clinton, Madeleine Albright and journalist Diane Sawyer. Otua's acceptance and success there proves that she inherited her grandfather's brilliance. It was Otua who informed me of Veronica's passing, before she herself returned to South Africa for the funeral.

I've read many compelling biographies, and throughout my life I've been inspired by the stories of a number of great people, including some of my own ancestors and relatives, but I have never been so drawn to a figure as I have to Robert Sobukwe. It's hard for me to explain it in a way that helps others understand, and I am certain I've fallen short here, but to me he represents the essence of aspired humanity. Self-made, intelligent, wise, empathetic, strong, principled, articulate, reasoned, disciplined, charismatic and caring, to name perhaps his most striking attributes. Sobukwe led from the front, and his beliefs remained steadfast in the face of the most extreme oppression, in a way that is otherwise unimaginable.

At many times, I was brought to the brink of tears both by the extreme cruelty to which he was subjected and by his most remarkable character, demonstrated time and again in his composed responses. One of the most poignant sections of the book deals with an exchange between Robert and Benjamin during the Robben Island years, when Robert chastised Benjamin for his expression of pride in the wake of a distant political victory. Robert's reply came complete with historical analysis and the summation that one must be magnanimous in victory, not vengeful. If anyone could be forgiven for harbouring sentiments of vengeance, it was

Sobukwe. Yet, as Pogrund wrote, 'I was struck, as I so often was, by the absence of self-pity.'

Robert Sobukwe is my role model, my idol, my hero. I am incredibly grateful to know him through the pages of his biography and through the connections I've formed with several of his family and friends. It saddens me that his legacy was hijacked, at his very funeral no less, by a militant element, but that may help to explain why he is not better known today. The tide seems to be turning, largely through the efforts of many, such as Dini and Benjamin, so that Sobukwe is now better known and appreciated. It remains my hope, however, that *everyone* will come to know the true grace of Robert Sobukwe.