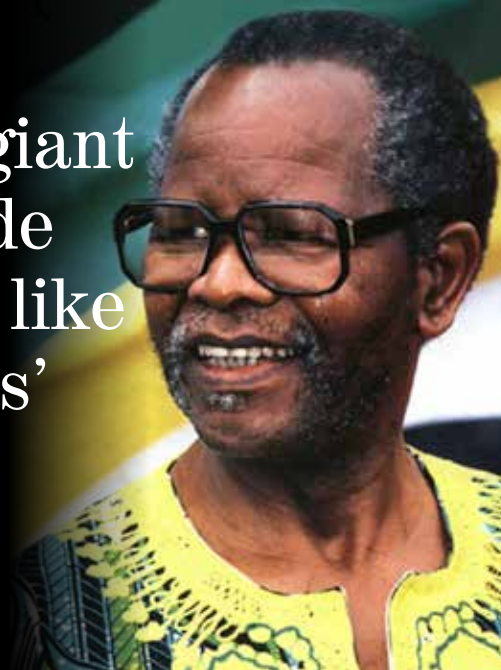


## OLIVER TAMBO

‘A great giant who strode the globe like a colossus’



I am immensely privileged that I had the opportunity to interact with and learn many lifelong lessons from Oliver Tambo during the 31 years from 1962 until he passed away in 1993, which encompassed many of the years when OR led our movement during some of the most critical moments in its history.

By Thabo Mbeki

The ANC sent Oliver Tambo into exile in 1960, shortly after the Sharpeville massacre. Our leadership expected that the apartheid regime would carry out a campaign of extreme repression to destroy the ANC. It therefore took the decision to locate its Deputy President outside the country to ensure that the ANC would continue to exist and pursue our struggle until victory was won.

I, and others, followed Oliver Tambo into exile in 1962, two-and-half years after he had left. Like him, we were sent out of the country by the ANC, but on a different mission. We were sent out as students charged with the task to study and acquire skills that

a liberated South Africa would need.

The fears of the ANC leadership in 1960 had been proved correct. By 1962 our struggle was facing difficult challenges as a result of the apartheid regime's sustained campaign of repression, which was destined to get worse. As members of the ANC Youth League we were very determined to contribute to the effort to defeat this campaign of repression and intensify the struggle for the victory of the national democratic revolution. Because of this, I was among those of our youth who tried to resist leaving the country to study.

In the end Walter Sisulu directed me to meet two of our leaders, Duma

Nokwe and Govan Mbeki, who conveyed the instruction, rather than a proposal of the movement, that I should leave the country. To accommodate my concerns, they undertook that Oliver Tambo would discuss my future with me when I had completed my first year at university in the UK.

On our way out of South Africa, I met the late Joe Modise in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, now Botswana, where he had delivered a new batch of MK recruits. Having returned to Bechuanaland after detention in Southern Rhodesia, present day Zimbabwe, I was convinced that this gave me just cause to return home, arguing that our attempt to leave the country had failed.

Modise, already a member of the then very secretive MK, refused to assist me to return home. Instead he argued in a stern voice that my task was to proceed to the UK as I had been instructed. He made no effort to hide his displeasure at my attempt to persuade him to cooperate in what he considered would be an act of indiscipline.

I first met Oliver Tambo, OR, when we arrived in Dar es Salaam in 1962. As I had been advised, he told me that we would discuss my future when I had completed my first year at university.

One of the passengers on the plane on which I flew out to London to begin my studies was Dr Kenneth Kaunda, KK, later to become President of independent Zambia. At Dar es Salaam airport, in the presence of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, OR handed me over to KK saying that he would take care of me during the flight to London.

As promised, at the end of my first year at university, in 1963, OR met me in London. Because I insisted that I wanted to join MK, and return home to fight, he agreed that I should terminate my studies. When I informed the university accordingly, it opposed the decision strenuously.

A little more than a week before the university reopened, I received fresh instructions from OR stating that the leadership had reviewed our decision and decided that I should return to university, which I did. In the end this instruction was repeated until I had completed my Master of Arts degree in 1966.

Eight years later, in 1974, the

Swedish Liberal Party held an international symposium in Stockholm, which OR had been invited to address. However, he sent an instruction to me to attend in his place. This was during the very week when Zanele and I got married. Despite my protests, which OR rebuffed by insisting on the need to respect the decisions of the ANC, I went to Stockholm as directed.

I returned to Africa in 1971, having stayed in Europe since the early days of my exile in 1962. I came back to the ANC headquarters in Lusaka, Zambia, to serve in the Revolutionary Council as Deputy Secretary to the late Moses Mabhidha, with the Council chaired by Oliver Tambo.

Later, appointed to work as Political Secretary to the Acting President of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, I had the responsibility of preparing the drafts of OR's public speeches and the major public documents of our movement.

This work demanded intimate understanding of the strategic and tactical tasks of the movement, the contemporary balance of forces at home and abroad, our objective challenges at all moments, and what the leader of the ANC, Oliver Tambo, would have to say publicly, bearing in mind our domestic and international tasks and audiences, in order to sustain the advance of our struggle.

Many a time I had to live with the embarrassment of OR completely rejecting my draft texts and, on a number of occasions, using his own notes to deliver addresses radically different from the draft speeches I had prepared.

Many a time I had to spend numerous hours with him to discuss specific formulations used in the draft texts, which he thought represented a careless or imprecise use of words, or inaccurate understanding of our movement's policies, history, tradition and values.

Fifteen years after the 1974 Stockholm symposium, in 1989, and having worked with him for many years by then, I visited OR in London as he was recuperating from his stroke. This had occurred soon after we had completed a gruelling trip through a number of countries of southern Africa. We undertook this trip to consult the

Front-line States on a document we had drafted under OR's leadership, which was ultimately called the Harare Declaration. This Declaration served as the basis on which we engaged the apartheid regime in negotiations, starting with the secret discussions in 1989, mainly with the National Intelligence Service.

After the consultations with the Front-line States of southern Africa, the Harare Declaration was adopted by the UDF and the rest of the mass democratic movement in South Africa, the OAU, the Non-Aligned Movement and the General Assembly of the UN.

President Kaunda understood both the importance and urgency of our mission and provided us with a plane to help us undertake our tour of southern Africa. The government of Zambia took care of the costs of the plane while the governments of our region hosted us in all the countries we visited.

Our first meeting in Dar es Salaam was with a government delegation led by the then Prime Minister, Salim Ahmed Salim. When we went to bed that night, our delegation, with the exception of OR, was somewhat depressed. This was because the Tanzanian government delegation had expressed great scepticism at the very idea of engaging the apartheid regime in negotiations.

The following day we met Mwalimu Julius Nyerere. After a presentation by OR, Mwalimu expressed full support for the initiative we had taken. He made a critically important suggestion, which our NEC finally supported, that our document and negotiating stance should recognise the strategic reality that as much as the apartheid regime had not defeated the liberation movement, neither had our movement defeated the white minority regime.

There will be other occasions to make a proper assessment of the impact on our struggle and the evolution of our democracy of the strategic intervention that Mwalimu Julius Nyerere made as we prepared to engage the apartheid regime in a new form of struggle centred on the peaceful transfer of power to the people.

As I have said, I visited OR in London in 1989 as he was recuperating from his stroke. On this occasion we

discussed that our movement was faced with conducting our struggle in new and complex circumstances. He then communicated another mission, the most challenging since I first met him in Dar es Salaam 27 years earlier: look after the ANC and make sure we succeed. You will know what needs to be done.

On OR's instruction, in 1989 I began talking to Madiba, Nelson Mandela, by phone, while he was in prison. We continued this telephone contact after he was released in 1990, before I returned home. I must presume that OR authorised this contact to ensure that because of the guidance that his life-long friend and comrade, Madiba, would provide, I would not make mistakes that would compromise the advance of our struggle and revolution.

An important part of Oliver Tambo's life coincided with critical and defining moments in the evolution of our struggle, each imposing an obligation on our movement, the ANC, to respond in a creative and decisive manner, fully cognisant of our possibilities and constraints.

I am immensely privileged that I had the opportunity to interact with and learn many lifelong lessons from Oliver Tambo during the 31 years from 1962 until he passed away in 1993, which encompassed many of the years when OR led our movement during some of the most critical moments in its history.

It might appear to the casual reader of this contribution to this book of tribute to Oliver Tambo, on what would have been his 90th birthday, that this humble piece is more about myself rather than the immortal hero of our struggle, Oliver Reginald Tambo.

However, the personal stories I have told relate a relationship which positions OR as the subject, and myself as the object of policies and actions that throw light on the character of the subject of this important book, one of the most important founders of democratic South Africa, OR Tambo. ■

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