

# Walter Sisulu: I Will Go Singing

as told to George Houser and Herbert Shore



*During the freedom struggle in South Africa, the African National Congress bought a farm in Rivonia, a suburb near Johannesburg. By 1960 the ANC knew that it was going to be banned by the government, so it got the farm as a safe house for underground work. In 1962 the place was raided by the police, and key leaders of the ANC, including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, were arrested.*

*Walter Sisulu is one of the giants of the freedom movement. A close friend and mentor of Mandela, the two were fellow prisoners on Robben Island. Sisulu became Secretary General of the ANC in 1949, and throughout the years of the struggle he was at the center of the movement's leadership.*

*George Houser and Herbert Shore, both active in the African liberation struggles, held extensive interviews with Sisulu to put on record an oral history of his life. This history has now been published under the title *I Will Go Singing*. An excerpt of this compelling book (reviewed on p.26) follows. —Editors*

I was thinking how I must go to the gallows. And I thought I must go to the gallows singing—for the sake of the youth who follow us, so they will know that we went without fear and that we had fulfilled our task in life.

I would sing with a strong voice so that they would all hear. We must show that our death would not mark the end of the liberation movement, but would be an inspiration to our people in their struggle.

The rest would now be up to them.

I was ready.

— Walter Sisulu

**BOTH THE PROSECUTOR AND THE JUDGE** challenged the right of ANC to claim to speak for the African people when its membership was so small compared to the population.

I told him we speak for the aspirations and the hopes of the African people. We listen to what is in their hearts whether they are members of ANC or not. Dr. Yutar [the prosecutor] then said sarcastically—I remember clearly—“Sisulu”—he always called me this, never “Mr.” or any other title. He started out trying to address me as “Walter” but I would not accept that—“You think you know what is in the hearts of all the Bantu, or do you spend your time agitating, telling them what ought to be there.”

That was when I said to him, “We do not have to tell the African people what ought to be in their hearts. Dr. Yutar, I wish you were in the position of an African. I wish you were an African and knew the position.”

He asked me if I had been persecuted by the police myself. “What is this so-called persecution and arresting indiscriminately with no offense? How do you know they arrest people innocently?” I told him they arrested my wife. In 1962 I was arrested six times. I have been persecuted by the police.”

I said to him, “Dr. Yutar, you have a young son about the same age as my son. How would you feel if your son came to court to see you and he was arrested for not having a pass, especially since he is only fifteen and didn't have to carry one. But the police would not believe him. How would you feel? That is persecution of the innocent by the police... .”

But it was Operation Mayibuye that they asked me most about. I repeated over and over again that we were discussing the plan still, some for, some against; that we knew violence would come, but we had not yet agreed to guerilla warfare. At the time of our arrest no decision had been taken. I myself did not think that conditions were right for such an operation to be undertaken. And we were never planning to encourage or collaborate in an armed invasion of South Africa from outside.

Everyone, my comrades and all of the defense lawyers, were pleased. They felt I had done well in my contest with Yutar. George Bizos [one of the ANC's lawyers] said that he could now collect on his bet. He had wagered with the others that Yutar would be drawn into a political discussion and that I would best him. So I was pleased.

**But still you expected the death penalty?**

What else could I expect? It must be the death sentence. They had charged us with sabotage instead of treason because a charge of treason would have required a preparatory examination and the accused would have to know the evidence against them so that they could prepare their defense properly. But whatever they call the charges, in terms of the material found, it qualifies as treason, and I could not see anything else but death.

**You were all certain there would be no acquittals, as there were in the Treason Trial?**

There was expectation of possible acquittal for Kathy and for Raymond Mhlaba. We expected that at most, maybe three would be acquitted. Indeed, one was acquitted—Rusty Bernstein. That was not my expectation. I did not expect Rusty to be acquitted. I expected Raymond Mhlaba to be acquitted. I did not see how they were going to convict him. But Dr. Yutar was determined to have him guilty. At one stage in the testimony of the prosecution, they were talking about Raymond, and the judge said to the prosecutor. "This Raymond, is it not the Raymond they were talking about who was in exile?" And, indeed it was Raymond they were talking about. But the prosecutor says, "No, my lord, no, no, it was not." He was trying to find a way of convicting Raymond Mhlaba. The line of reasoning of the judge that he was in exile at the time would have acquitted him.

**We heard that at one point as you were passing the other accused in the court, you made a sign across your throat with a finger, implying that you were going to get the death penalty. Did something like this happen?**

I have no doubt that I did. Because when we were arrested, I said—I think I was talking to Govan Mbeki then—you see, there is no way out of here. I was sure there was no way of escaping the death sentence. I'm not sure what Govan's attitude was. I'm not sure, but I was certain that for at least six of us there could be no verdict other than guilty. The question was the sentence. And I was certain that at least four of us would hang.

**When did the verdict finally come?**

On May...yes, May 20th, that was it, the prosecution handed out their final statement. They were very fancy—bound in blue leather, I remember.

There was an exchange between the judge and Dr. Yutar, which gave us a little bit of hope. It seemed that the judge accepted that the MK and the ANC were separate organizations and that the plan for guerilla warfare had not as yet been approved. In fact, at one point he interrupted Brain's closing argument to state that he accepted that no decision or date had been fixed on for guerilla warfare. He adjourned the court until June 11 when the verdict would be given. During that time, Nelson wrote his law exams for London—while we were waiting.

When the day came for the verdict, the police packed the court and the streets around it. Justice de Wet gave his verdict very quickly. He said he would give the verdicts without reading the reasons for them, but he emphasized that he had very good reasons.

Nelson, I, Dennis, Govan, Raymond, Andrew Mlangeni, and Elias Motsoaledi were guilty on all four counts. Kathy was guilty on one of the four counts and Rusty was acquitted. The judge then stood up and adjourned until 10 o'clock the next morning for sentencing....

**And you were preparing yourself for the death sentence?**

I was preparing myself for it. I wasn't going to be taken by surprise by anything as far as that is concerned. Albertina [Sisulu's wife] came. The lawyers, especially George Bizos, said, prepare yourself. So they were also now. And Albertina was warning me to be strong, you see, on that situation because they were sure of the position.

**And what were you thinking as you prepared yourself for the death sentence?**

I was thinking how I must go to the gallows. And I thought I must go to the gallows singing—for the sake of the youth who follow us, so they will know that we went without fear and that we had fulfilled our task in life. I would sing with a strong voice so that they would all hear. We must show that our death would not mark the end of the liberation movement, but would be an inspiration to our people in their struggle. The rest would now be up to them. I was ready.

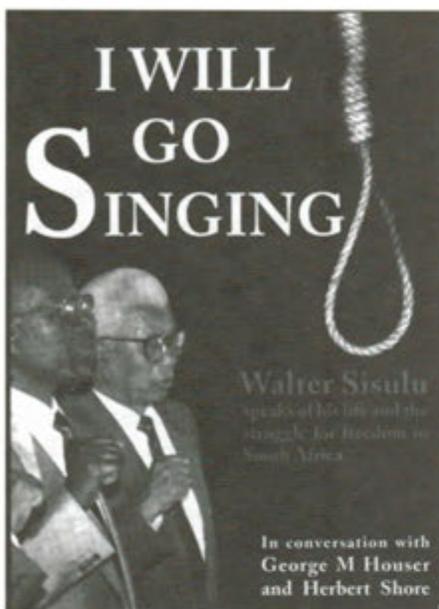
**When the sentence was finally rendered what was your feeling?**

Oh, it was like a discharge. It was like a discharge because I said, well, I really felt that legally we were guilty of what they call treason and I could not see how you can escape it. Therefore when they came with a sentence like this, I thought, well, it's like a discharge. Our movement should have been broken, without leaders and without hope. But instead it was alive, singing, marching in procession right there around the court, with ANC colors flying.

It was not just our celebration, but had become a world celebration with ANC colors waving. We were expecting death, and now we were all alive, preparing for the next phase of the struggle.

International pressure helped us avoid the death sentence. No doubt. No doubt about it. We had very good lawyers, but the situation in South Africa was such that it was not going to be the ability of the lawyers that determined. The attitude of the government was so hostile, so clear, so worked out, so systematically worked out, that on the basis of that there seemed to be no way we were going to escape the death sentence. Now we were a central part of a worldwide movement. ■

*From I Will Go Singing: Walter Susulu Speaks of His Life and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa. In conversation with George Houser and Herbert Shore (published by Robben Island Museum in association with The Africa Fund, New York). Reprinted with permission. Available from FOR.*



**I Will Go Singing: Walter Sisulu Speaks of his Life and the Struggle for Freedom in South Africa**

*In conversation with George M. Houser and Herbert Shore.*

Robben Island Museum, in association with The Africa Fund, New York  
2001, 245 pages, \$20.00 plus postage  
(available from FOR)

This remarkable book provides unique insights into the question, "What does it take to make a revolution?" Its narrative, describing many details along the complex route to the achievement of democracy in South Africa, flows from the perspective of a pathbreaker. Like Nelson Mandela, whom he first met in 1941, Walter Sisulu is one of the architects who shaped and actually built the path along which South Africa's Black men and women fought their way from the condition of landless cheap laborers—so without rights that a woman and her husband could not live together in any city, and had to hide their illegally trespassing babies from the police—to the moment of triumph in 1994 when an entire population cast its votes, and Nelson Mandela was elected first President of a democratic South Africa.

Sisulu played a central role in shifting ANC politics toward broad mobilization and away from elite negotiation. He kept his steady purpose and strength in the face of decades of defeat and twenty-

six years of imprisonment. His thoughtful recollections reveal the tenacity required to throw off oppression—and to concede that there is still a long way to go before racism and profound economic inequalities are finally overcome.

Born in 1912, Sisulu grew up with his extended family in the countryside, far from the city where his mother worked. After a few years at school, he went to work in the gold mines at the age of fifteen. He organized his first strike, in the biscuit factory where he was then employed, soon after reaching twenty. He went on to join the African National Congress in 1940, at the age of twenty-eight. From then on, the chapter headings in this memoir of his life parallel the major political events in South African history of the last sixty years.

*I Will Go Singing* derives special interest from its "insider" perspective, shedding light on key differences that threatened to destroy the liberation movement. Could Africans work with Indians? Should whites be allowed to join the African National Congress? Could African nationalists work with communists? At times even Mandela and Sisulu were divided on these issues, while seeing eye to eye on the changing strategies of struggle, from conciliatory to militant, from peaceful to armed.

Beyond this political narrative the reader will also find intimations of an extraordinary human being, with a sense of justice so profound that it seems integral to every cell, a calmness and generosity of spirit that allowed him to avoid feeling hate against all whites by distinguishing between the individual and the system.

Sisulu's mother worked as a maid in a hotel. His father was a white magistrate who subsequently became a district attorney. Thus technically, in race-mad South Africa, he could have avoided carrying a pass, and moved "up" to a semi-privileged position. But he reveals a deeply seated sense of belonging to the African society in which he was raised, saying at one point: "I carried a pass because I never wanted to see my colour determine my race."

Sisulu was in jail almost continuously from May 1963 to October 1989, much of that time with Nelson Mandela

and many other political prisoners on Robben Island. He reflects on those years not as lost or wasted time: "No ... never for a moment. I knew it had an effect, it was doing something.... Working for the unity of the people, the leadership coming together" (p. 231). He is still working toward that goal today in a free South Africa.

South Africa's current Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, himself an exiled activist during the apartheid years, has welcomed this book as "a wonderfully readable reflection of our country's turbulent past, and on the veterans of the struggle and their heroics in the face of relentless oppression.... This would be a suitable text-book for high school pupils...today's generation would relate to this story."

—Jennifer Davis

**The Better World Handbook: From Good Intentions to Everyday Actions**

*by Ellis Jones, Ross Haenfler, Brett Johnson, and Brian Klocke.*

New Society Publishers Ltd., Box 189,  
Gabriola Island, BC Canada, V0R 1X0  
(250) 247-9737,  
201, 304 pages (paper) \$18.95

Kirkridge has hosted FOR's Peacemaker Training Institutes for the past six years. At the end of the week, we trainers send the young participants away with lists of resources, books, films, job opportunities, videos, and relevant websites. I have often wondered if, after a week chock full of information, the participants even notice these lists, which could be invaluable when they return to organizing. Lists are easy to lose.

So if I had one wish, it would be that every person who comes through FOR's nonviolence trainings in the US and Canada would receive a copy of *The Better World Handbook*.

At first glance, I thought the *Handbook* would prove overwhelming. After all, changing the world is a daunting task. But the book focuses on action, and I found this not at all overwhelming. Indeed, it was rather encouraging. The big systems are all addressed; the media, politics, transportation and energy, and organizing strategies within and outside of these systems are all explored. But