

Words and Deeds

BY JOHN S. SAUL

The following text is based on remarks made by John S. Saul, a member of the SAR editorial collective, at the same memorial meeting for Joe Slovo in Toronto at which Linzi Manicom (above) also spoke.

I mourn Joe Slovo as a friend and as a companion in political dialogue, dialogue that was, I'm sure, more important to me than it was to him - though he always took a serious interlocutor seriously and I learned a lot from him over the years.

I needn't repeat here the drama of Joe's rise from humble circumstance to major historical actor nor present a litany of his accomplishments - political, military, theoretical - in the service of South Africa's liberation. They have been well reported, and, in any case, the fact that today is officially declared a national day of mourning in the new South Africa speaks volumes in itself. Nor do you need me to tell you that the various testimonials echoing across South Africa and around the world are well merited.

His accomplishments will, in any case, be discussed for years to come - as will the more controversial aspects of his career and life-long political project. But knowing Joe I'm sure he would have valued a debate at his own memorial service even more than he would have valued a series of glowing testimonials!

Moreover, it was, as I've said, in the heat of a number of one-on-one political dialogues that I came to know him best. After all,



Joe Slovo & Cyril Ramaphosa visit Kallehong after IFP attack, Jan. 1994
(The photographer was killed moments after this was taken.)

for long years he presented himself pretty much as a Stalinist of the old school, although never without a sense of humour on the subject: he had, for example, a whole raft of anti-Soviet jokes, each one more outlandish than the one before, that he would tell with relish and a real twinkle in his eye. We debated issues related to such general themes on a number of occasions. Indeed, he scanned my writings carefully - I was pleased to find - challenging, in particular, my various suggestions that a high cost was being paid for the fact that the grimly orthodox South African Communist Party had become the primary guardian

of socialism and of the left impulse within the ANC. He did admit to me once, more recently, that some of the vigour of his positive stance regarding things Soviet was tactical, framed by the reality that this was where the arms came from: certainly his approach was always eminently practical (though also capable of grounding, in the opinion of some of his critics within the movement, a certain political ruthlessness). There were also his widely-read reflections, from the 1980s, on the question "Has Socialism Failed?," reflections which contained a great deal of strong, if retrospective, criticism of the

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Soviet model. Nonetheless, his politics remained of a certain cast, and the precise mix of costs and benefits such politics produced in the context of the South African liberation struggle has only just begun to be assessed.

Was he, in any case, merely well on the road to reformism by the time he wrote his last, critical papers? This will be another controversial chapter for some future biographer, one that will interrogate Slovo's role both in the negotiations that, after 1990, led to the democratization of South Africa and in the new ANC-led government that came into power in 1994. That his role was important there can be no doubt, but on several recent visits to South Africa I was struck by how much that role had come to be debated amongst young cadres both within the SACP and without. As one observer wrote to me in the days after his death, "Whether prematurely jettisoning MK in August 1990 (without adequate consultation), or giving apartheid bureaucrats job security in October 1992 (which will doom the RDP), or agreeing to absolutely dreadful constitutional deals in the last months of 1993, or trying to denude the SACP of radical vision and energy (against the will of rank-and-file members), or, as Minister, fetishizing market-oriented solutions in the housing sphere, Slovo's weaknesses were serious."

Of course, others – and not merely editorialists in the establishment press who, somewhat paradoxically, had come to value his role, often in very outspoken terms – have been much more inclined to see Slovo as a voice of reason, a crucial actor in helping steer the ANC successfully through the treacherous waters of the transition. How to evaluate the art of the possible – and the plausible resonance of socialist goals – under South African circumstances? Answers to such tough questions will ultimately have

to frame our judgement of the course taken by Joe Slovo (and others) in the past few years. As it happens, he and I promised each other, in the press of the Carlton Hotel in the immediate aftermath of the election, that we would discuss just such questions when I returned to South Africa sometime this year. I can now only imagine the arguments he might have made – although debate the relevant issues with his own inimitable vigour, this he would surely have done.

And the fact remains: the bottom-line, even for those now rather more critical and questioning young cadres mentioned earlier, remained one of deep respect for all that Joe Slovo had accomplished, and for the depth of his commitment to the anti-apartheid struggle. Perhaps I myself saw most clearly, at first hand, just what his clear-eyed, unwavering commitment could mean on the one occasion when, momentarily, I could be of some practical help to him, rather than merely an interlocutor in the realm of theoretical debate. In 1988 I had visited South Africa illegally and spent a month there; on my way back to Canada I stopped in Lusaka and met with Joe. This time our conversation was different. He wanted to know just what I had seen on the ground and what I thought about what I had seen. He interrogated me – there is no other word, for this time it was not word games we were playing – clearly and deeply, only pausing to comment when I summed up with the suggestion that things looked a little bleak, as, for the moment, seemed to be the case in South Africa. No, he said, a bit sternly, the pace is already picking up again. I thought of his celebrated joke: "Five years ago I said the South African revolution would be consummated in five years, and I see no reason to change my opinion." But of course, in 1988, he was right. We must thank the dialectic, or whatever other force is at work in history, that he lived, at least, to see

the day of victory that he, as much as anyone, had willed into being.

The cost was great, of course, though he bore it lightly, and bravely. I always marvelled at the casual, perhaps even foolhardy, manner in which he moved about, in Maputo, for example, when we both lived there. I would meet him on the street and he would offer me a lift. "My car's just over there," he would say. And there it would be, across the boulevard, under a tree and, as often as not, unlocked. He would merely jump in and start it up and I – did I have any choice? – would feel compelled to follow suit while trying to pretend to myself that it would never be wired with bombs!

Not that he escaped entirely unscathed. Many of his friends and comrades did die, not least his wife, my friend, Ruth First, killed, precisely, by a South African bomb. Ruth and Joe's was an intriguing, tempestuous relationship, frayed by somewhat divergent politics as Ruth moved away from the SACP fold to a more independent left position and by other tensions – but a remarkable relationship nonetheless. In fact, it was on the day of her death that I felt both closest to Joe and also closest to the spirit of sacrifice that made Joe's career, and indeed the whole anti-apartheid struggle, so heroic. I had been held up at the University, entangled, as other witnesses to the assassination were, in the police investigation, but when I finally arrived at Ruth and Joe's house he embraced me tightly. "John," he said in my ear, "They have taken away half of my life."

I rejoice that, nonetheless, he saw the new flag and the inauguration and the beginnings of a new South Africa. I mourn for his second wife, another friend from Maputo days, Helena, his three daughters, Gillian, Shawn and Robin and all South Africans and am grateful for the opportunity to honour Joe and mourn him with all those, South Africans and Canadians, who are here today.