

Speech on my 75th birthday at N's home.

Zambia.

19th March, 1977.

Preceding her speech the record "In the Light of Experience", the subject of her talk, a rendering in pan-pipes by Zamfir was played.

I little knew that one day I would find myself in an alien land, speaking to so many people I had never known before and who today I can count as my friends. I must thank you for coming this evening.

Chekhov once remarked that a man, the son of a serf could squeeze the last drop of the slave out of himself and could become truly free. "How does one do that?" he asked. To this he made answer which was in truth a summary of his own life. "By hard work, by education, by taking responsibility and by self-exhaustion in one's chosen field."

Note the phrase, "By self-exhaustion in one's chosen field."

In looking back inevitably over the full seventy-five years of my life, (for some this is too long but for me all too short) it seems to me that the words of Chekhov at the end of his years, came as a result of his own life's experiences in a society of backward Asiatic despotism, of barbaric enslavement and abject poverty, of Russia before the 1917 revolution.

Though my family was a pioneering progressive one (my ^{eldest} brother was the second Black doctor in Cape Town, my sister, the first nurse, etc) I was nevertheless a member of a whole Black community, subjected to the slave laws of a society which condemned us all to a life of social, political and economic helotry. This poison of social helotry pierces the tender soul of every Black child born in South Africa maiming his pride of being and in the end leading him to self-destruction. I can today and so can we all today, recall the endless column of our fellow students, the cream of the intellectuals and a source of pride to their family and community and above all to the mass of unlearned people who could no longer endure this life and wantonly destroyed themselves. Their sensitive souls revolted at the humiliation they daily had to undergo. The people of South Africa, the oppressed Black people have paid dearly throughout many decades to see generation after generation destroyed, brilliant men and women who could have led their nation to liberation.

Born in a family which had many links with the Indian and Malay sections of the Black community, the Indian revolt against the imposition of the £3 Poll Tax on every indentured Indian labourer, man, woman and child on the sugar plantations in Natal led by Mahatma Gandhi in 1913, early imbibed with a broad national pride. When as a child of 11 years, I saw Gandhi in my own home after the revolt, I wondered at this emaciated figure invariably followed by crowds of people and the respect accorded him. Later at the age of fifteen I remember to this day reading the heading in the newspaper my papa was reading "The Nihilists have conquered power in Russia." I wondered in my innocence who these people were who believed in nothing. The contradiction in the statement did not strike me at first only later, when the realisation came that they must have believed in something if they gained power. To cut this digression short, I was historically conditioned as we all are by our past and present conditions of life. Children breathe their pores every nuance, open and subtle and hate injustice meted out to the helpless in every shape and form.

My first direct contact with the Africans (Cape Town was fairly distant from the areas where they were concentrated) was when my sister and I entered Fort Hare (our own choice) as students. There for the first time

/I came to know....

I came to know the calibre and the intellectual capacity of the student group as such. Most of the brilliant ones, the more sensitive became victims of the system and early in their manhood departed to the shades but I can still recall each one with his joie de vivre.

When I returned to Cape Town I felt myself a country lass for in the middle twenties there was a new intellectual activity pervading the atmosphere. There was a resurgence amongst all intellectuals of every colour and shade. Progressive lecturers at the University of Cape Town masters in their own field of mathematics, Biology, science, languages, art and literature were bringing in new ideas and also old ideas in new forms, like absolute freedom, free thought etc. The impact of the Russian Revolution, bringing a fresh revolutionary outlook on all social, political and economic matters were discussed feverishly, first amongst the white intelligentsia and spilled over to the Blacks. I felt myself wanting in this heady atmosphere and began to study with the same feverishness, first the literature of the great Russian writers. "The Brothers Karamazov", "War and Peace", "Crime and Punishment" were books that held me spellbound. Lermontov and Oblomov were writers who also posed the great problems of the age. There was Gorki too and a host of others. Those extraordinary erities, Chernyevsky, Belinsky and Dobrulybov far in advance of their time set standards unequalled even to this day. I can't remember them all. Today as I can recall I still feel the lyricism of those ideas that must have seeped through every and fibre of my being. You will notice that I had left but not yet deserted the Elysian fields of England but the great humanity expressed so poignantly in Russian literature invaded my mind. This was the condion humaine that gave me sustenance then and remains today as the source of my strength. It is said that the poet must burn the reader with his word but the writer has the same claim. The French writers to whom I turned next, Balzac, Stendhal, Emile Zola to name but a few became my bed companions and led to further development of my being. The great Greek tragedies of Aeskylus, Sophocles and Euripides gave me a more rounded development, I think. These were some of the peaks that had to lead only to one road.

For me I could not escape to literature as a way out of the social ostracism I had to endure daily, the slights meted out to the oppressed. I was tempted but I seemed to have been more of a political animal. I conceived a loathing for the liberals who coated the bitter pill of inhumanity by soothing syrups, carefully distilled of religion, patience and forbearance to the oppressed and who wielded such influence over the Blacks.

I began to climb the forbidding peak of learning to understand the politics of our oppression. Many left-clubs, political in nature had by then come into being to study the ills of the age and to provide a way out of this closed and oppressive society. I tasted these to the full for they were wide-ranging in character. Science, literature, art, economics, politics in relation to man's development and progress were subjects hotly debated and discussed by men who later became famous in the international field, in their own field. There were men like Farrington, professor of Greek who wrote the classic "Greek Science", Bodmer "The Loom of Language" who was asked by the Chinese to put the Chinese script into Roman letters also other famous figures. I was then just a student, eagerly absorbing these new ideas. And slowly it dawned on me that all ~~and~~, yes, all human knowledge whether philosophy, science, politics was intimately related to the way man produced (and reproduced) his means of livelihood and his social structures.

I was now ready to turn to the most urgent problem which faced our own society - namely the liberation of the oppressed people in our land. The I took was inevitable. It seemed that I was ^{unconsciously} ~~unconsciously~~ moving in that direction. It was then I turned to the great social thinkers of the world - Rousseau and Fourier before the great French Revolution and the many utopian writers whose theories came under the blanket term of socialism. As you will appreciate at this stage I became somewhat of an idealist in the philosophical sense. You must also understand that the way a human being develops is never in a straight line. I was sometimes moving forward and sometimes backward. I was zigzagging like a crab sideways in mental development. It is only here, at this /at this....

moment in time that I am putting some logic to the process of growth.

Suddenly then, like a man who had been long traversing a desert looking in vain for sustenance but all the while moving in circles, I came across the writings of Marx and Engels, the greatest of all philosophers who reduced all these vague utopian worlds of a better life for mankind into a science. It was like drinking from a life-giving stream of sparkling water. The scintillating style of Karl Marx, the clarity with which he dissected society with its structures gave me a direction and a purpose in life which have sustained me and still sustain me throughout these long years. Subjectively I and our group, amongst whom were Tabata and my youngest brother Goolam, though ready to take responsibility, were in fact catapulted into the stream of political life.

For in 1935, when the Government launched a new attack on the rights of the African people, we had no option but to spearhead the attack against any move by the old leadership to compromise and came out for a boycott of the new laws. Fate and circumstance soon placed the mantle of leadership on our shoulders. Our mission was to create a new leadership based on principles - a 10-Point demand for democratic rights for all men and women, regardless of colour, race, sex and religion born in South Africa. For over ten long years we had undergone a long arduous training and apprenticeship before we thought we were qualified enough to enter upon the political arena. The opportunity came at the Convention in 1935 and another nine years had to pass, a time of rallying the ardent young people to ~~the~~ the liberation struggle and educating them in our ideas before the Unity Movement was born in 1943. We had to squeeze the last drop of the slave from every individual and more, from the whole of the oppressed people to make it truly free, so that they could be receptive to our ideas. Our first move was to carry out an intensive propaganda against the insidious slave mentality and to break the barriers between the different sections of the oppressed people and to lay the foundations for unity on the basis of a common programme.

I think we can say, in all modesty that these two aims have been accomplished and have become part of the common heritage. The oppressed stand today on the threshold of greater things to come. They are ready, even more than ^{ready} prepared shall we say, to forge their ~~freedom~~ destiny - their freedom and liberation from oppression and exploitation.

To our youth we say finally: "Your duty is to squeeze the last drop of the slave out of yourself by hard work, by education, by taking responsibility and self-exhaustion in one's chosen field."

And to Africa who today unknowingly bars our way, we say: "There is a tide in the affairs of men ~~which~~ which taken at the flood leads on to fortune, omitted all the voyages of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries."

In conclusion I want to pay tribute to all those revolutionaries, comrades and the millions of nameless ones who throughout the centuries have unstintedly laid down their lives in the cause of freedom.

I thank you all.