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*An Island of Meaning
in a Sea of Oppression:
the Other Side of Robben Island*

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*... Their understanding
Begins to swell; and the approaching tide
Will shortly fill the reasonable shore,
That now lies foul and muddy...*
(Shakespeare, The Tempest [Prospero], vii, 79-82)

"Escape," observes Helen Suzman,² "was well-nigh impossible."³ The Alcatraz of apartheid South Africa, Robben Island, was a maximum security prison for non-white males. Set in Table Bay, about nine kilometres from the mainland at Cape Town, Robben Island became notorious when Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu were sentenced to life imprisonment there on 13th June 1964, after the Rivonia Trial.⁴

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² . Helen Suzman was a Member of Parliament for Houghton in South Africa from 1953 until 1989, and she used her position in Parliament to fight for equal justice for all human beings.

³ . Helen Suzman, *In No Uncertain Terms, Memoirs* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 1993), p. 152.

⁴ . Rivonia Trial: So-named because the accused were arrested at the African National Congress's underground headquarters in Rivonia, a suburb north of Johannesburg. Nelson

Robben Island has been used, throughout history, as a dumping ground for those considered as social or political threats to society. However, Robben Island does not only symbolise oppression, terror and suffering. Another side of the island was revealed when changes began to occur in South Africa during the 1980's, when it became possible for prisoners to register for university studies by correspondence. It is this "other side" to the island that I propose to explore in this paper. Then, I will conclude by touching on the current debate that surrounds the future of what is seen today as an island of meaning in a sea of oppression, now that it is no longer a prison. Any discussion of Robben Island has to begin, however, by addressing the images of isolation, injustice and suffering that this Alcatraz of apartheid South Africa still conjures up.



Deep into the icy waters of the Atlantic
Somewhere around the Cape of Storms
engaged by rocky beaches all around
assaulted by piercing winds from the Benguelo
like an abandoned ship... lies the Island of the damned.⁵

Indeed, soon after Robben Island was discovered by Europeans, the first white settlers at the Cape used it as a place of banishment. The first record of the island having been used as a penal colony dates back to 1525. The island's first political prisoner was the Khoikhoi chief Autshumao, who was incarcerated there in 1658. During the eighteenth century, the East India Company used the island as a penitentiary for "political dissidents"⁶ — a euphemism for employees who displayed opposition to the company. After 1846, lepers were sent to the island in exile to "die unwanted on an island of terror."⁷ Soon, however, lepers were not the only ones to be subjected to isolation when "criteria for admission to Robben

Mandela and seven other defendants were found guilty of sabotage and conspiracy, sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to Robben Island (June 1964).

⁵. Extract from a poem entitled "Island of the Damned, Robben Island," (1979), written by Tokyo M. G. Sexwale (now Premier of the Pretoria Witwatersrand Vaal region).

⁶. Jurgen Schadeberg, *Voices from Robben Island* (Randburg: Ravan Press Ltd., 1994), p. 6.

⁷. Simon A. de Villiers, *Robben Island Out of Reach, Out of Mind* (Cape Town: C. Struik Ltd., 1971), p. 55.

Island ... shifted broadly from visible deformity or ulceration, and destitution, to ... more superficial skin problems, ... during the leprosy scare years (c.1887-1910)."⁸ Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, in 1936, Robben Island was declared military property, but in 1960, as resistance to apartheid laws grew, culminating in the Sharpeville protest, the South African Prison Service took over the island from the Department of Defence in order to jail political prisoners there.

In 1964, when Nelson Mandela and seven other leaders of the ANC and Umkhonto we Sizwe⁹ were sentenced to life imprisonment and sent to Robben Island, they encountered appalling conditions: prisoners were tortured, punishments severe, mail interfered with, the food and clothing inadequate, and prisoners had to work hard in a lime quarry. Kwedie Mkalipi,¹⁰ a political prisoner from 1966 to 1985 on Robben Island, testifies to the hardship in the high-security prison: "In 1966, I was very very much tortured It is difficult to describe ..."¹¹ "I feel bitter about it. At one time I actually lost hope of ever coming out alive. They tried to dehumanise us."¹² Ahmed Kathrada,¹³ who spent 18 years on Robben Island, from 1964 to 1982, provides a telling indication of the prisoners' torment when he says, quoting Tolstoy, that "in prison the warders have regulations instead of hearts."¹⁴ Indeed, the authorities — and in particular the warders — inflicted all sorts of cruelties and humiliations on prisoners in order to break them and crush whatever political ideas they had. Torture was frequent, yet, what became important for the prisoners was that the ideas for which they were imprisoned on Robben Island should never die. Shaka Radebe, convicted of furthering the aims of a banned organisation and imprisoned in Robben Island from 1985 to 1990, observes that his political beliefs and commitment were —

⁸. Harriet Deacon, *Leprosy and Racism at Robben Island 1846-1900*, paper presented to the Centre for African Studies Seminar, 16 October 1990 (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 1991), p. 31.

⁹. Umkhonto we Sizwe: Military force "founded in December 1961 as a response to the Government's intransigence in the face of peaceful anti-apartheid protests ..." Anton Harber & Barbara Ludman, *Weekly Mail and Guardian, A-Z of South African Politics: The Essential Handbook* (Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 231.

¹⁰. Kwedie Mkalipi (ex-prisoner 122/66) was arrested in 1964 on a sabotage charge and sent to Robben Island in 1966. He was released on 10 February 1985 having spent 20 years on Robben Island. He is a member of the Pan Africanist Congress.

¹¹. Interview of Kwedie Mkalipi conducted by myself on 30 September 1994, in Cape Town.

¹². Jurgen Schadeberg, *ibid.*, (interview of Kwedie Mkalipi, prisoner 122/66), p. 49.

¹³. Ahmed Kathrada was charged with sabotage in the Rivonia Trial and given a life sentence. He spent 18 years on Robben Island. After the April 1994 elections he was appointed Political Adviser to the President.

¹⁴. Jurgen Schadeberg, *ibid.*, (interview of Ahmed Kathrada, prisoner 468/64), p. 41.

albeit paradoxically — reinforced by his Robben Island experience.¹⁵ This process occurred in what I have called the “other side” of Robben Island.



What is this other side of Robben Island? And how did this paradoxical process, this strengthening of conviction, come to take place? Despite shades of political difference between prisoners on Robben Island, friendships developed and prisoners united against common oppressors. Moreover, under the leadership of Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, study groups in a variety of subjects, including economics, politics and history, were secretly organised at the lime quarry, which became in Walter Sisulu's words, “the centre of the university of the Island.”¹⁶ Govan Mbeki,¹⁷ who was imprisoned on Robben Island from 1964 to 1987, explains:

Some of our comrades entered jail illiterate. At the quarry we taught them to read and write. As there was no paper we used to write on the sand and on the lime. When we worked in groups at the lime quarry the lecturer of the group would do less physical work than his students. We put prisoners through all levels of primary and secondary school and even through to degree level.¹⁸

Extraordinary methods of communication were established by prisoners either during work in the quarries or through a well-organised clandestine network¹⁹ set up in all the different sections of Robben Island. The ANC leadership

¹⁵. Interview of Shaka Radebe conducted by myself on 31 September 1994 in Cape Town. He is now a student at the University of Cape Town.

¹⁶. Jurgen Schadeberg, *ibid.*, (interview of Walter Sisulu, prisoner 471/64), p. 27.

¹⁷. Govan Mbeki was arrested on 11 July 1963 and after being found guilty of sabotage at the Rivonia Trial was sent to Robben Island on 14 June 1964. He was released on 5 November 1987.

¹⁸. Jurgen Schadeberg, *ibid.*, (interview of Govan Mbeki, prisoner 21/67), p. 30.

¹⁹. “One man is credited, in particular, with defeating the [Robben Island prison] system of isolation between the sections.” As soon as Joe Gqabi was transferred to the section where the Rivonia trialists were, he “immediately set about devising all sorts of communication channels — and with this breakthrough, it became possible to prepare material and to smuggle it from one section to another. ... Gqabi belonged to the first group of Umkhonto we Sizwe cadres sent out of the country for training as military commanders, and his instruction had included covert communication methods.” Quoted from Govan Mbeki, *Learning from Robben Island:*

on the island secretly wrote political essays and marxist texts — which circulated and were sometimes preserved²⁰ — in order to give prisoners a political education. The effect of this unofficial learning in solidarity was not only educational but also a deepening of the resistance of prisoners. Jacob Zuma,²¹ who spent 15 years on Robben Island after having been convicted of sabotage, asserts that their “motto and objective was that if you were a political prisoner on Robben Island you had better come off Robben Island a better politician, a better fighter.”²² Moreover, as a result of campaigns by Helen Suzman and others, drastic changes were adopted in 1980 by the Minister of Police and Prisons, Louis le Grange. Political prisoners were henceforward to be permitted access to newspapers, and to undergraduate studies. Like Shaka Radebe, who completed his matriculation certificate²³ on Robben Island, many prisoners consequently won the right to enrol in universities such as UNISA (the University of South Africa) and correspondence colleges. “Robben Island was for this reason a blessing for political prisoners,” says Mncedisi Stuart Mciteka, adding that “the South African Council of Churches through the means of South African Prisoners Education Trust provided political prisoners with funding for their studies and still continues to do that.”²⁴ Neville Alexander, who was a political prisoner on Robben Island from 1964 to 1974 affirms that “many organisations, including NUSAS” (the National Union of South African Students), “the churches, and overseas organisations, were (and are still) prepared to finance the studies of political prisoners.”²⁵ As a result, Robben Island, this Alcatraz of apartheid, paradoxically became a place of hope for prisoners, a centre of learning, and the cradle of those who were later to become involved in South Africa’s comparatively peaceful transition to a new political era. Significantly, many former Robben Island prisoners now occupy important positions in contemporary South Africa: not only did Nelson Mandela

The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki (Claremont: David Philip Publishers (Pty) Ltd., 1991), p. xxii.

²⁰. Govan Mbeki, *ibid.*, a remarkable book containing several political essays written in Robben Island.

²¹. Jacob Zuma spent 15 years on Robben Island from 1964 to 1979. In April 1994, he was appointed Social Welfare Minister in the Kwa Zulu/Natal Provincial Government.

²². Jurgen Schadeberg, *ibid.*, (interview of Jacob Zuma, prisoner 40/64), p. 57.

²³. The South African equivalent of the French *baccalauréat*.

²⁴. Interview of Mncedisi Stuart Mciteka conducted by myself on 1 September 1994 in Cape Town. He was accused of furthering the aims of the ANC, a banned organisation and was imprisoned for two months in Robben Island. In 1994, Mncedisi Stuart Mciteka was Regional Organiser at Lawyers for Human Rights.

²⁵. Neville Alexander, *Robben Island Dossier 1964-1974*, (Rondebosh: University of Cape Town Press Ltd., 1994), p. 54.

become President of South Africa, but Walter Sisulu was appointed Deputy President of the ANC; Jacob Zuma, Social Welfare Minister in the Kwa Zulu/Natal Government; Ahmed Kathrada, Political Advisor to the President; Govan Mbeki elected vice-president of the Senate; Tokyo Sexwale, Premier of the PWV Province...



“Never again will anybody be kept here for the reasons that we were kept here.”²⁶ These were the words Nelson Mandela used to conclude his visit to Robben Island on 11th February 1994, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of his release. What, then, is to become of the island? Most political parties in South Africa believe that it should become a museum, an exception being the Conservative Party who would like the island to continue to be used as a prison. Rumour has it that certain businessmen want to turn Robben Island into a hotel complex, but they will be faced with opposition by former political prisoners. Insisting that he is talking on behalf of ex-prisoners of Robben Island, Kwedie Mkalipi affirms: “We are totally against that sort of thing. We don’t want people to profit out of our suffering.”²⁷ Nelson Mandela himself declares that “the memory of what happened there must be preserved,” and adds that Robben Island “is too important to be turned into a mere tourist resort.”²⁸ People who suffered on the island would prefer the entire world to see it as the symbol of their unyielding determination and hope, amid suffering, misery, torture, and isolation.

An atmosphere favourable to forgiveness has been engendered by recent political changes in South Africa. Indeed, an official Truth and Reconciliation Commission that will probe the “sins” of the past and investigate specific abuses of Human Rights is presently being created in South Africa; thus the South African government hopes to bring about reconciliation and reconstruction through repentance and forgiveness. It would appear that the South African Commission is to be heavily modelled on the Chilean Truth Commission, whose objective was not to establish “perfect justice” — which would probably “[have led] to back-

²⁶. Jurgen Schadeberg, *ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁷. Interview of Kwedie Mkalipi conducted by myself on 30 September 1994 in Cape Town.

²⁸. Jurgen Shadberg, *ibid.*, (interview of Nelson Mandela), p. 19.

lash and further injustice” — but rather to bring about “national reconciliation.”²⁹ Kwedie Mkalipi agrees with this intention: “When will you end chasing all those criminals? ... What happened was an accident of history ... People must learn to forgive, but not to forget, so that such abuses may never be repeated.”³⁰ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize winner in 1984, believes that “there is a need of healing, of rehabilitation, of confession, of forgiveness,” adding that “black people have a wonderful capacity to forgive.”³¹



Robben Island became a symbol not only of human suffering and hardship, but also of triumph and dignity over oppression and humiliation. It is therefore important that generations to come learn about the two sides to the island: the outward, already much publicised aspects, the cruelties and humiliations inflicted on non-white male political prisoners; and the other side, the struggle — inwardly and in solidarity — for a viable alternative to apartheid South Africa. For it was here, amid a sea of oppression, that a new South Africa emerged, based upon understanding. “All suffering under a social order that is senseless prepares the soul for vision,”³² and the vision that emerged from the horrors of Robben Island was one of reconciliation and forgiveness — the only grounds, as Nelson Mandela insists, on which a new South Africa can be constructed.



²⁹. Anthony Johnson, “Cape Times,” 13/09/94.

³⁰. Ibid., interview conducted on 30/09/94.

³¹. The Guardian, *The Legacy of Apartheid*. Edited by Joseph Harker (London: Guardian Newspapers Limited, 1994), p. 209.

³². Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, in Charles Villa-Vicencio, *Trapped in Apartheid: A Sociological History of English-Speaking Churches* (New York: Orbis, 1988), p. 188.

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