

BOOK REVIEWS/ EKBESPREKINGS

SLOVO: THE UNFINISHED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

JOE SLOVO & HELENA DOLNY

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The book *Slovo: The Unfinished Autobiography* begins with an introduction by Slovo's second wife, Helena Dolny, in which she explains the context in which Slovo wrote his memoirs, and why it was left incomplete. The book is divided into two main parts. Part One entitled *Autobiography* was written by Slovo. He started his autobiography with a chapter on his return to Obel in December 1981, a small town in Lithuania where he was born. His parents migrated when he was two years old and settled in Argentina before moving to South Africa where they settled permanently. He narrated the different opportunities that were available to him during his years in exile to visit Obel and the reasons why he was unable to visit the place of his early childhood before December 1981.

In the second chapter of his autobiography he focused on how he grew up in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, his early school days and how he eventually joined the Communist Party of South Africa in 1942. In chapter three he focused on his role in the Second World War. He mentioned that the Communist Party of South Africa decided to encourage all able-bodied white members to join the South African army. He narrated how he succeeded in bluffing about his age after his father had refused his consent. He further narrated how he was allocated to the Signal Corps and underwent training in radio and telephone morse communication and eventually landed in Egypt and Italy. He summarised his experiences during the Second World War as follows: "I never saw a dead or wounded body, although I knew that we were suffering casualties from the messages I received and forwarded at the brigade signal communications centre". Slovo

further stated that his participation in the Second World War brought a major point of departure in his life. The Discharge Soldier's Demobilisation Committee granted him a five year scholarship to study law at the University of the Witwatersrand where he met Harold Wolpe, his life long friend.

In chapter four he focused on the post war protest by the Communist Party of South Africa by relating workers' rights, the homelessness and protests against the elections of members of the Native Representative Council. In chapter five and six he recounted how he met his first wife Ruth First when he started to practise as an advocate, and his experience as a legal practitioner. In chapter seven, Slovo focused on the defiance campaigns of the 1950s and the drawing up of the Freedom Charter.

In chapter eight Slovo described his role as part of the legal team that handled the defence of the accused in the Treason Trial. In chapter nine he focused on mass protests that took place in the 1950s both in urban and rural areas. In chapter ten Slovo focused on the Sharpeville massacre and how the event brought the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) into prominence. In chapter 11 Slovo focused on his memories of detention in 1960. In chapter 12 he focused on the formation of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) and the beginning of the armed struggle. He briefly mentioned Operation Mayibuye but stated that he had discussed the operation in full in the book entitled *South Africa: No middle Road*. In the last chapter (12) Slovo focused on how, following the arrest of Nelson Mandela on 5 August 1962, Joe Modise, Harold Wolpe and himself tried to organise an attempted escape by Nelson Mandela from prison.

Part two of Joe Slovo's book entitled *Reflections* was added to part one by his second wife Helena Dolny, following Slovo's death. The section consists of letters sent to Joe Slovo from July 1991 when he was diagnosed as having multiple myeloma (bone marrow cancer). Dolny named this section "Prologue to dying". The second section in part two is a selection of letters relating to his funeral. The third section is a selection of international tributes to his life, followed by a selection of speeches made during Joe Slovo's memorial serv-

ices throughout the world. The book ends with an epilogue by Helena Dolny to family friends.

Slovo: the unfinished autobiography represents a primary source of information on the life and times of Joe Slovo. Through his autobiography he has opened a number of research areas for historians, especially military historians. Such areas of research include the reasons why the Communist Party of South Africa encouraged white South Africans, including its members, to enlist as volunteers during the Second World War; the experience of Joe Slovo as a member of the Signal Corps during the Second World War and scholarships that were available for ex-servicemen following the war. Another area of research that is opened by the book is with regard to the history of MK, especially the early history. Historians will have to research in detail the role played by Joe Slovo during the formation of MK and during the armed struggle in general and whether he utilised the experiences he had gained during the Second World War in the armed struggle. This book will remain a starting point for research into any aspect of Joe Slovo's life.

Of added value in the book are the photographs from Joe Slovo's family album. The photo of his father Wulfus Slovo wearing an army uniform during the First World War, together with pictures of

Slovo himself as a member of South African Signal Corps, and with friends in Italy during the Second World War, will be of interest to military historians. The book further contains pictures of Slovo with his first wife, family members and friends. Of significance is a photo taken during Joe Slovo's funeral which shows his coffin on a Defence Force gun carriage indicating the role Slovo played in South African military history.

The last section of the book could have been left out and published separately as a collection of the voluminous letters and papers which Slovo have generated during his life, or donated to an archival depot where it can be properly utilised by researchers.

The work is highly recommended to historians, especially military historians as Slovo narrated his role in the Second World War and in the formation of MK. It is also recommended to scholars and members of the public who would like to study Joe Slovo as a prominent figure in South African history, the history of the South African Communist Party or the early history of MK.

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