

With compassion and courage Janet Smith

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Sundays are a Sisulu affair. It's the dinner table, it's the garden lawn and it's the oversubscribed kitchen in the family house in Linden. These are the places for laughter, the chiding of beloved children, potent memory and so many tales of love. And at centre-stage is the mother of all South African mothers.

Albertina Sisulu turned 90 on Tuesday, and it is as if all those loving Sundays can belong to the nation that cherishes her, just for once. We would all beg a moment in her space, but it wouldn't be fair.

After all, for much of her nine decades, Mama Sisulu has been governed by what she can do for others.

From a childhood of want - in which, when she was 11, her dying father implored her to care for her siblings - through the unforgiving years of apartheid, and even after democracy, she has been at the centre of other lives.

Now, she is regarded as one of the great heroes of the liberation struggle, even if that was perhaps not a path she chose for herself. Yet she has been such a force for good, and that must have brought its own contentment.

Africa has a legacy of significant women leaders. In her unique role as an activist who has held family as close as she has the liberation of the country, Sisulu - a modern name - could keep company with the most courageous of her political antecedents: the 17th-century military strategist Queen Nzinga of Angola; the 18th-century humanist Dona Beatrice of Congo; the powerful 19th-century queen mother Muganzirwazza of Buganda.

In South Africa, Sisulu's name is always included in a list of remarkable women: Helen Joseph, Lillian Ngoyi, Sophie de Bruyn, Dorothy Nyembe, Charlotte Maxeke, Ruth First, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, Epainette Mbeki and Amina Cachalia. Many, like Sisulu, marched on the Union Buildings in 1956 in protest at pass laws and oppression.

For many who knew her in her earlier years, in the 1950s and '60s, the reputation of the tall, commanding woman in her crisp black nurse's cloak bearing a voluminous medical bag went ahead of her like a light. Black people had scant hope under the monumental apartheid gloom, and at that time, Sisulu was not only the wife of the much-imprisoned ANC leader Walter Sisulu, but an admired activist and mother of seven. Five were her own, two were adopted. So the nuances of the epithet - mother of the nation - could not have been better applied than to Sisulu, the symbolism extending to her vocation as a midwife. She offered an unexpected charge of hope.

Hers was, of course, no average family.

Her son Zwelakhe - leading businessman and former journalist and editor - remembers what it was like to feel as if everyone had a claim on his mother when he was a boy. He was protective, devoted to her. He is open about his longing for his parents when he was at boarding school in Swaziland, living a peculiarly complex life for a child. But he believes he understood his mother.

"Thinking about my earliest memory of her ? the most striking thing about her to me when I was a small boy was that she was tall, distinguished. Everyone would know who she is. She had presence. If she walked into a room, you would know she is there.

"My mother was always a giver. Both of my parents were givers, and they would take nothing from anybody.

"When we were living in Soweto, ours was one of the few houses that had a telephone and

electricity. We had to have the phone because my mother was one of the few qualified midwives in Soweto, and our home was basically like a community centre. My mother would get a call and then she would have to walk, sometimes 5, 10km, to where the woman was in labour, to the distress destination.

"Things improved later on when there were municipal clinics, but my mother was always in control of the situation.

"It was almost like she could never hand things over to other people to do. And if people rely on you to that extent, and you're then at a point where you can't say no if people come and ask for help, it can be overwhelming."

He says their tiny house in Soweto swelled with her presence, particularly in the years after his father was imprisoned.

Of the children in the house during that time, five - Max, Mlungisi, Zwelakhe, Lindiwe and Nonkululeko - were the Sisulus' biological children.

The couple also adopted Walter's niece and nephew Gerald and Beryl. At other times Samuel, a former Robben Islander, and another child, Jonqumzi, were part of the household.

Later, during a women's demonstration against the pass laws in Joburg in 1958, Sisulu was jailed.

Her daughter Lindiwe, now the Minister of Housing, has an edge of sorrow in her memory about what happened when her parents were finally both behind bars. Her mother was the first woman to be held under the vicious 90-day detention order.

When their parents were banned, the seven children were suddenly alone, left to run the house and look after themselves. No other adults were allowed to occupy the house with them. The eldest - Mlungisi and Beryl, both 13 at the time - took charge and allocated duties. But it was demanding and emotional.

"Life became unbearable. Stark, naked, ugly," says Lindiwe. "One had to cook, one had to do laundry, others had other things. We were all miserable, really out of our depth, but we didn't want to break her in prison. She had to be my father's greatest pillar. So we coped.

"My mother had always protected us from all of the ugliness that surrounded us as best she could. Perhaps she created an environment in which we could thrive so that we did not have to deal with the present.

"She loved to make me look pretty. I think it was a bit of a diversion, to get away from the hard truths. She made our clothes, she really lived for her family, and she always tried to make up for both of them - not only financially, because she was always really the breadwinner."

Lindiwe says her mother always wanted to see her children grow up in an "urban context because she saw that as a conduit to education".

But she was proper, "demanding of standards, things being done in a particular way without cutting corners. She was Victorian in that way, orderly and a strict disciplinarian."

Sisulu, who had joined the ANC Women's League in the 1940s, became its treasurer in 1959. She had been a member of the executive of the Federation of South African Women since it was formed in 1954. In that year, she was the face of a strident campaign to boycott bantu education, imposed to subjugate the minds of black children.

Throughout apartheid, she was an arch-crusader, paying grave witness through imprisonment and detention, sometimes for many weeks away from her children and her community.

Sisulu lived the struggle, the true struggle - the one of the heart and the feet, with an answer always ready for those with questions about how to crush the unspeakable might. There was always the answer - and the embrace.

She rose to become surprisingly powerful within a top tier of men in the liberation movement, performing key roles such as leading a delegation of the United Democratic Front, which was established in 1983, to the US with activists such as Sister Bernard Ncube, Azhar Cachalia and Jessie Duarte in 1989. They were received by the then US president, George Bush.

Nobody could have been prepared for the peculiar complexities of Sisulu's life. She and Walter committed themselves - and, therefore, their family - to an unbending belief in the righteousness of the liberation struggle, so when she effectively became a single parent time and time again, her purpose was clear.

Walter was detained for his activities a few times before he went underground in 1963 and before he was finally arrested in the infamous raid at **Liliesleaf Farm**. Sisulu was herself banned from 1964 to 1981 and again from 1982 to 1983, confined to her home by the shadows of those who watched at nights and at weekends. Most harrowing was that she had to endure the inevitability of her children being imprisoned or going into exile.

But as she celebrates 90 years, Sisulu's children, 26 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren cherish her. Love is one thing, respect and emulation the sublime result.

And of course, as is to be expected, work in her name continues.

Her Albertina Sisulu Foundation is more than 50 years old, and she has been honoured in recent years many times for her commitment to the struggle against apartheid and her social work among women and children. An example of the honours bestowed on Sisulu is that by the World Peace Council in Basel, Switzerland, which elected her its president.

Meanwhile, children's lives are being saved by the Walter Sisulu Paediatric Cardiac Centre for Africa, which she has endorsed.

The centre at Sunninghill Hospital performs corrective cardiac operations on disadvantaged children. The Absa Foundation and Barclays have committed R1-million a year to this campaign for life, and the foundation also sponsors Sisulu's annual Africa Gala Luncheon, which happens on International Children's Day.

?Albertina Sisulu is one of those women who suffered immensely and who struggled heroically without ever flinching. In the dark days after the Rivonia Trial, she was one of the key links between the internal and external movement, and kept the embers of resistance alive.

?Mama Sisulu personifies the demanding years known as the ?Roaring Fifties?, including the march to the Union Buildings . She had a share of the hazardous times in the underground and the repression of the early Sixties.

?She was always available to the young lions during the 1976 uprisings. When the UDF was formed in 1983, she was an automatic choice as a co-president.?

? Nelson Mandela, from the archives of Nelson Mandela Foundation

?You know better than anybody how much you have been a part of myself over so many years and decades.

Absence has, strangely, been a binding element of that relationship. The two of you (Albertina and Walter Sisulu) were so much one that we could only look on in admiration and be inspired.?

? Nelson Mandela, in a letter to Albertina Sisulu on her 85th birthday, read out by her grandson, Shaka

?Albertina Sisulu is a fine leader in her own right, but her capacity to lead and her political strength is also the product of a good marriage, a good political marriage that is based on genuine equality and on shared commitment. And this is why, though Walter Sisulu is absent, when people need to refer back to the history of Walter Sisulu, they can find a living reference point in

Albertina Sisulu and in Walter's children.?

? Ruth First, speaking to Albertina and Walter Sisulu on the occasion of his 70th birthday in May 1982

?Walter Sisulu?s outstanding contribution is also due to the sacrifices of his wife, Albertina Nontsikelelo Sisulu ? a brave, militant comrade who throughout these difficult years, has acted like a rock of ages.?

? Sechaba, April 1981

?She represents a new beginning in the deepening of democracy, the creation of non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous South Africa. She offers us an opportunity to emulate her example.?

? Joburg mayor Amos Masondo in 2003 at the opening of the Albertina Sisulu Centre for children with disabilities in Soweto

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