

# OBITUARY



October this year saw the passing away of the great South African novelist, Alex la Guma. RIXAKA pays tribute to Comrade Alex and comments on his lasting contribution to South African writing.

Maxim Gorky once asked a question: "Whose side are you on, artists?" When asking this question, one can imagine, Gorky was addressing himself to the issue of partisanship in the arts. Concerning creative activity of South Africans, especially black South Africans, this becomes a major question. It speaks about the responsibility of the artist, where he stands in this day and age when, as Yuri Barabash observes in his book *Aesthetics and Poetics*, "creativity has been shifted to the epicentre of the battle of ideas, into the whirlpool of political passions of the age... (when) art and literature is now increasingly becoming one of the most important scenes for ideological struggle."

Writing in South Africa has gone through many stages. What we now call the literary tradition of our country found its sustenance in the oral tradition where tales, riddles, myths, legends and children's word games were evolved and passed on

from generation to generation. Poets and novelists later wrote about the glories of past kingdoms. They wrote about the social life of African Communities before colonisation. One has in mind here writings of people like Thomas Mofolo, Vilakazi, Dlomo, etc. All this writing gave flesh to the skeletons of historical research. The main actors in the bantustans farce are aware of the power of the written word and, using the apartheid state machinery, they try to claim creativity for reactionary purposes.

South African literature has for quite a long time consisted mainly of works written by white South Africans whether, as Rowland Smith puts it, they wrote in English or Afrikaans. Whatever had been written by blacks was regarded as non-literature until this racist myth was finally put to death over the last twenty years by writers like Peter Abrahams, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Alex la Guma, Arthur

Nortje, Dennis Brutus, Mazisi Kunene, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Dugmore Boetie, Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane, Nat Nakasa, Can Themba and many others. Bessie Head and others who had left South Africa wrote stories and novels, taking their themes not directly from South Africa but from the new places and societies in which they found themselves.

Certain things happened in South Africa that had a devastating effect on writing. The Sharpeville shootings and the subsequent declaration of the State of Emergency meant that many writers left the country, many in fear for their lives, others as part of a programme of the liberation movement. People like Mphahlele left the country in rage at the passing of the Bantu Education Act.

The writers who remained, such as Nat Nakasa, Can Themba, Casey Motsisi, still used the journalistic genre to reflect the reality of South African life.



Most of these writers had at one time or another worked for *DRUM* or the *Golden City Post* in the major cities of the country. South Africa was blessed at that time with talented journalists like Henry Nxumalo and Alfred Hutchinson. Hutchinson left the country, also, and Henry Nxumalo was murdered in cold blood. His murderers are still walking the streets as free men, or they have been promoted to colonels — or they are occupying the seats of the mighty. Can Themba was to die much later in Swaziland and Nat Nakasa, so the story goes, committed suicide in the cold and lonely despairing jungle of New York. Some of these pioneers in black writing had formed writing collectives that gave rise to publications such as *Classic*.

The 70's came and black consciousness became the embraced philosophy of the hour. Oswald Mtshali's *Sound of the Cowhide Drum* was published and the author was declared the "1001st English poet", a most suspicious accolade. Mongane Serote came out with *Yakhal'inkomo*; Njabulo Ndebele and Mafika Gwala wrote incisive essays and miscellaneous prose that finally enriched publishers like Ad. Donker and Renoster Press. Black consciousness poets, most of whom had borrowed the inner-city idiom of Harlem and I dford-Stuyvesant and Newark, translated into a language of the crypts Steve Biko's assertion, *Black man, you're on your own!*

In all these bloody years of writing, of reflecting the nature of the hideous apartheid beast, most writers were addressing themselves to the international arena as well as to the struggling masses. In all the body of work produced very few artists tried to show the way, to put forward strategies and say what needed to be done. But, as an answer to Maxim Gorky's question, a small handful was beginning to say loudly that they were on the side of

the oppressed. They were on the side of progressive forces fighting for change, fighting for peace and a democratic South Africa.

1976 came and blew whatever little respect people had been having for the Pretoria racist regime. People saw for themselves that they were no longer dealing with sane men but with Hitler's children. Writers recorded what had happened in the long winter. Some were thrown into prisons, detainees; others fled the country. In the camps of the African National Congress, cadres began writing poems and stories that exhorted the thinking youth of our country into joining Umkhonto We Sizwe. Goch Street followed and Solomon Mahlangu declared that his blood "will nourish the tree that will bear the fruit of freedom". A thousand patriots are gone, now, and we speak of that minute of changing shadows from Mahlangu to Moloise.

As all these things were happening, Mphahlele was writing. He wrote *The Wanderers*, a journey of man into the jaws of despair. Perhaps its tone and pessimistic vision should have alerted us that Mphahlele, once a guiding light in African literature, would return to the land he had rejected and make peace with its temporary rulers. So much for that.

One of the most enduring writers whose works have more than adequately answered Gorky's question was Alex la Guma. Alex la Guma passed away on October 11, a day of Solidarity with Political Prisoners of South Africa and Namibia.

Alex... Where does one start?

Alex la Guma was born in Cape Town 60 years ago. His father was James la Guma, a leading member in the Communist Party of South Africa. Alex himself was a member of the Party and had earlier on participated in the formation of the Coloured People's Congress. He left South Africa in 1966 per decisions of the ANC. Prior to that he had been under house arrest since 1962. He

was imprisoned at various times most notably as a defendant in the marathon Treason Trial.

He was educated at Trafalger High School and Cape Technical College. He worked as a clerk, book-keeper, factory hand and journalist. It was these humble working class beginnings that shaped his writing and made him create memorable characters that are at once believed and immensely moving.

His own father, an uncompromisingly political man, weaned Alex on the teachings that national oppression is an evil which must be fought relentlessly. When James la Guma went to attend the 10th Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1927, he brought back with him an issue of the newspaper *Izvestia* with a report on the work of the Comintern. Subsequently he gave young Alex that newspaper together with other documents. After many searches by the fascist Gestapo, the newspaper and the documents disappeared from Alex's flat in Cape Town.

In his own writings — in *A Walk in the Night*, his first novella — it becomes clear that la Guma had chosen to throw his lot with the oppressed people of his country. *A Walk in the Night* is most memorable in that la Guma gave us characters such as Michael Adonis through whose eyes we see the life of the so-called Coloured people of South Africa. We walk with Michael up and down the fetid streets of District Six where scrawny cats and dogs fight for supremacy over and ownership of the contents of garbage cans. We see how desperate people love, hate, curse, breathe — in a word, live — the rhythm of violence, how heroically, some try to get out from under the heavy boot of repression that has stayed on their necks since the first wars of resistance.

Other books followed. It should be noted that la Guma's books are banned in South Africa. This means that a vast



majority of South African people is unaware of what one of the brighter stars of our country has said and written for and about it. *And a Threefold Cord* and *The Stone Country* followed. By this time la Guma had made his mark in the literary world. He wrote *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, which was very favourably received and a number of short stories, some of which appear in *Quartet*. All these were joined by his novel of awesome power about the liberation struggle called *In the Time of the Butcherbird*. In 1969 Alex la Guma was awarded the Afro-Asian Prize for literature.

Receiving the President Denis Sassou Nguesso Prize for African Literature in Brazzaville, in August, 1985, la Guma told RIXAKA that he could not have written what he had without the inspiration derived from the struggle of the South African people. "Whatever I have produced in the literary field," he said, "came out of the stirring influence of our people engaged in the battle to survive the ravages of apartheid, to overthrow the racist

regime and to establish a democratic South Africa. If literature is linked to life, then the life of our heroic people should inspire all writers in our country."

At the time of his death Alex la Guma had shown in action what it means to be a revolutionary committed to internationalism. He was the General-Secretary of the Afro-Asian Writers Association, the Chief Representative of the ANC in Cuba and a leading member in the South African Communist Party.

On the 23rd of May, la Guma was awarded the order of Friendship of the Peoples by decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. When presenting the order in the Kremlin, B.A. Ashimov, Vice-President of the USSR Supreme Soviet said that the award had been made in tribute to the literary and political work done by Alex la Guma in the promotion of friendship among the peoples of Africa and Asia and in the cause of world peace.

In the penultimate passage of the novel *In the Fog of the Seasons' End*, Beukes, the main

protagonist of this novel on struggle, "stood by the side of the streets in the early morning and thought, they have gone to war in the name of suffering people. What the enemy himself has created, these will become battle-grounds, and what we see now is only the tip of an iceberg of resentment against an ignoble regime, the tortured victims of hatred and humiliation. Those who persist in hatred and humiliation must prepare. Let them prepare hard and fast — they do not have long to wait."

The unfolding scenes inside our country, the Cape Town that is being torn asunder as people move towards freedom — these are the happenings la Guma would have liked to write about. But whatever he has written has become a beacon of light for the younger writers of our country — and this, Alex's recreation and regeneration in ourselves, is an invaluable political act, and for this he will be remembered.

Alex la Guma leaves behind his wife, Comrade Blanche, and two sons, Eugene and Bartholomew.

We say, *Hamba Kahle, Alex.*

