

DEATH OF ALEX LA GUMA —

Writer and Freedom Fighter

by Z. Nkosi

The death of Alex La Guma, prominent writer and political activist, has deprived the South African liberation movement of one of its best-known and best-loved figures. He died in hospital in Havana on October 11, 1985, after a heart attack. He was 60 years old.

Born in Cape Town in 1925, Alex La Guma was the son of Jimmy La Guma, one of the pioneers of the liberation movement and a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of South Africa prior to its dissolution in 1950.

After completing his education at Trafalgar High and Cape Technical College, Alex La Guma worked as a clerk, book-keeper and factory-hand before entering the service of the movement full-time. As a young man Alex joined the Communist Party and was a member of the Cape Town District Committee of the Party until it was banned. He maintained his political activity in the succeeding years, taking a foremost part in the preparations of the historic 1955 Congress of the People where the Freedom Charter was adopted setting out the perspectives of the Congress Alliance headed by the African National Congress.

The 1950s witnessed a sustained assault on the Coloured people by the Nationalist regime, which sought to eliminate their franchise rights and segregate them in all spheres of life under the provisions of the Population Registration and Group Areas Acts. Thousands of Coloured men and women were rounded up and subjected to sordid classification procedures. One woman described her ordeal at the hands of a reclassification officer in the Transvaal:

“He looked at my profile from the right side, then from the left. Then he examined my hair and he has a fine comb there which he runs through the heads of some. He touched my nose and asked what my mother’s looked like”.

She was reclassified African. As vice-chairman of the South African Coloured People’s Organisation, Alex La Guma was in the forefront of the people’s resistance to these barbarities. Speaking at a protest meeting in the Cape Town Banqueting Hall in August 1955, he said:

“We do not object to being called Africans. But we realise that when the government classify us as Africans, they subject us to all the life-destroying burdens of the African people. If we all unite under the banner of the Congresses, we cannot lose the struggle for freedom and democracy. We have the strength of millions on our side, not only in South Africa but outside. The Freedom Charter is going to be the basis of the new South Africa and the future belongs to us”.

In November of that year Alex took over the position of chairman of SACPO, and in that capacity led the campaign against the introduction of apartheid on the Cape Town bus system. (SACPO was later renamed the South African Coloured People’s Congress.)

On December 5, 1956, Alex La Guma was one of the 156 men and women of all races who were rounded up by the police all over the country and flown by military plane to Johannesburg to stand trial on a charge of treason — the prosecutor arguing that the democratic rights set forth in the Freedom Charter were of such a radical nature that the organisers must have envisaged the overthrow of the government by violence as the only means of bringing them about. It took nearly five years of legal argument and political struggle before the charges were thrown out by the court and the accused enabled to return to their normal lives.

Life for the political activist and the rebel in South Africa, however, is never normal. One night in 1958 Alex was the target of an assassination attempt when two bullets were fired through the window of the room in his home while he sat working at his desk. One bullet missed, the other grazed his neck. The would-be assassin was never traced, but a few days later Alex received an anonymous letter through the post reading: “Sorry we missed you. Will call again. The patriots”.

The treason trial was not yet over before the country was plunged into further turmoil following the massacres at Sharpeville and Langa on March 21, 1960 and the declaration of a state of emergency by the Nationalist regime. Ruling by decree, the government arrested 20,000 people throughout the country. Some dubbed "idlers" and "tsotsis" were hastily processed by kangaroo courts held secretly in the jails and shanghaied to forced labour in remote districts. Over 2000 of the top political leaders of the people were detained in prison without trial for periods up to five months. Among them was Alex La Guma. He spent the weary months of incarceration reading and writing, preparing himself for the career on which he was later to be launched with such success.

Alex had been a voracious reader all his life and from an early age he had tried his hand at writing. His first professional efforts, however, were as a member of the staff of the progressive newspaper *New Age*, whose staff he joined in 1956 and whose pages he illuminated with cartoons, news reports, stories and many striking vignettes of life and tragedy among the population of Cape Town.

Series of Arrests

All the while he continued with his political work and was no whit discouraged by the persecution to which he was subjected by the racists. In 1959 he was arrested with Ronald Segal and J. Morolong for entering Nyanga township without a permit with pamphlets calling for an economic boycott of apartheid firms and institutions. In 1961, when Nelson Mandela, as spokesman of the National Action Committee of the Maritzburg All-In African Conference, called for a three-day strike at the end of May in protest at the inauguration of the Verwoerd Republic, Alex La Guma and his colleagues in the Coloured People's Congress threw themselves into the campaign but were arrested and held for 12 days without bail under a new law specially passed by the regime to deal with the threat posed by the strike call. Although their leaders were in jail or in hiding during the crucial period before the strike was due to start, the Coloured people responded magnificently and Cape Town industry and commerce suffered heavily during the three days of the strike. Alex was punished for his role in the campaign. In July 1961 he was banned under the Suppression of Communism Act and in September charged under the Act for organising an illegal strike, but the charges were later withdrawn. In December 1961 he was ordered to resign from the Coloured People's Congress.

That same month, however, the people's patience ran out and on December 16 a series of bomb explosions directed against government

buildings and installations in various parts of the country heralded the appearance of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the military wing of the liberation movement. The regime's response was the notorious General Laws Amendment Act of 1962, the so-called Sabotage Act, providing inter alia for the placing of government opponents under house arrest. In December 1962 Alex La Guma was served with a notice confining him to his home for 24 hours a day. The only visitors permitted him for the five years of his notice were his mother, his parents-in-law and a doctor and lawyer who had not been named or banned.

The fact that he was living under 24-hour house arrest, and thus completely cut off from all possibility of political action, did not save Alex La Guma from still further victimisation at the hands of the regime. Following the passing of the 90-day no-trial Act in 1963, Alex was one of those arrested and detained without trial. In prison he was held in solitary confinement, locked in his cell alone for 23½ hours a day, the remaining half-hour being allowed for "exercise" — also on his own. As was the case with other detainees, he was denied visitors and any reading or writing material, refused access to his legal adviser and generally subjected to the most abominable form of mental torture so that he might be forced to answer questions to the satisfaction of the police. His wife Blanche, a nursing midwife, was also detained, and their two children, Eugene and Bartholomew, had to be cared for by relatives. Blanche La Guma was later released, but almost immediately served with a banning order. And in due course Alex was also released, but on bail, facing a charge of being in possession of banned literature — another charge which came to nothing.

In 1966 Alex La Guma was detained again. By this time the repression was so intense that on release he and Blanche were forced to leave the country with their two children. They first settled in London, where they played a large part in the consolidation of the ANC presence in the United Kingdom. Later they moved to Havana when Alex was appointed chief representative of the ANC in Cuba. Under the supervision of Alex and Blanche hundreds of South African students were able to acquire the education in various fields which was denied them at home.

During the years of exile Alex devoted as much time as possible to his writing, and also involved himself in the affairs of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association. At the time of his death he had been secretary of the Association for several years and in 1969 was a winner of the Association's Lotus Prize for Literature.

It was with the publication of his novel *A Walk in the Night* in 1962 that Alex La Guma's talents as a writer were first revealed to a wider audience. Bearing in mind the atmosphere of fear and prejudice which prevailed in business circles in South Africa at the time, it is hardly surprising that he failed to find a local publisher brave enough to launch him. Besides, he was banned and could not be quoted. So his first novel was brought out by Mbari Publications in Nigeria. It was instantly acclaimed, circulated world-wide and translated into several languages.

District 6

It is a short novel — barely 90 pages long. But in its pages teem the variegated types of Cape Town's District Six — the bar flies, the louts and touts, the workers and their wives, the prostitutes and pimps, the skollies, who constituted the most colourful community in Cape Town. District Six is no more, its buildings bulldozed and its population dispersed in terms of the Group Areas Act, but nobody who ever passed through District Six could ever forget its winding, crowded streets, its jostling humanity, its smells, its poverty and wretchedness, its vivacity and infinite variety. For all its outward degradation, the pulse of life beat strongly in its veins — so strongly that to this day the regime's attempts to convert it into a "white" area have been frustrated by the resistance of the whole community, black and white alike. The resentment of the people of District Six against their dispossession by the racists is being expressed today in the all-out struggle of the youth of the Western Cape against the regime and its police and military forces.

Alex La Guma knew District Six intimately, having lived there, in No. 2 Roger Street, for most of his early life before moving to the suburb of Garlandale. He knew and understood the people and their problems, their "troubles", as they called them, and he wrote of them with intimacy and care. These are not cardboard characters strutting lifelessly through his pages, but real, live flesh and blood men and women who, though weighed down by the neglect and insult of the world, yet proclaim insistently their determination to survive, to eat, drink and make love, to endure the night of loneliness and terror and welcome the cleansing dawn of tomorrow.

It is the very completeness of his knowledge and understanding of his milieu which gives Alex La Guma's prose its incisive bite. He does not strain for effect but etches his cameos of working class and lumpen life with artistry and precision. You can feel the grime on the tenement walls, smell the mounds of rubbish in the back lanes, hear the bursts of laughter from the corner pub, see the swift flash of the knife drawn in the heat of a quarrel. It is as dramatic and vivid as if it were taking place before your very eyes.

Part of the secret of Alex La Guma's success is the fidelity of his dialogue to the living speech of the people. The words burst from the page with startling realism, crackling like newly printed banknotes. He has the knack of creating a character from his speech, the language of one subtly differentiating it from another. These are real people talking — terse, racy, humorous, and convincing as truth.

As a person banned under the Suppression of Communism Act, nothing Alex La Guma said or wrote could be published or reproduced in any way. The General Laws Amendment Act of 1962, better known as the Sabotage Act, now part of the Internal Security Act, makes it an offence, without the consent of the Minister of Justice or except for the purposes of any proceedings in a court of law, to record or reproduce by mechanical or other means or print, publish or disseminate any speech, utterance, writing or statement or any extract from or recording or reproduction of any speech, utterance, writing or statement made or produced or purporting to have been made or produced anywhere at any time by any person banned under the Suppression of Communism Act from attending gatherings. Nothing Alex wrote was ever able to circulate in South Africa except illegally. His name, and that of his wife Blanche, remained on the banned list indefinitely.

As though to make assurance doubly sure, the censors seized copies of *A Walk in the Night* as they entered the country by post in January 1963, declaring that they found the book "objectionable". But the quality of Alex' writing overcame the efforts of the censors to suppress it, and his work over the years has won widespread recognition both at home and abroad. *A Walk in the Night* was followed by *And a Threefold Cord* (1964), this time dealing with life in one of the shanty towns on the periphery of Cape Town. Here are housed the tens of thousands of blacks for whom there is no "official" place to live, Coloureds and Africans clutching precariously to life on the outskirts of the cities which offer their only hope of subsistence. Many of the inhabitants are in the urban area illegally, lacking the papers which establish their right to existence, a prey to perpetual police raids, insecurity and poverty. Home for them is a crazily-constructed shack providing only the barest shelter from the elements.

There are no paved streets, sanitation, drainage or electric light in the areas; water has to be brought by the canful. In the Cape winter, when the rain comes pouring down, the roofs leak and the whole neighbourhood becomes sodden and waterlogged. Over all hovers the smell of dirt and wretchedness. Children play in the mud, and men and women flounder in the dark going to and from work — if they are lucky enough to have work.

These are areas where life is short and cheap, where violence flares out of hate and frustration, yet where humanity, love and hope sprout even from the dunghill of evil and decay.

And a Threefold Cord is drenched in the wet and misery of the Cape winter, whose grey and dreary tones Alex La Guma has captured in a series of graphic prose-etchings. It could have been depressing, this picture of South Africa's lower depths, with its incidents of sordid brutality and infinite desolation. But Alex La Guma's compassion and fidelity to life infuse it with a basic optimism. His electric dialogue flashes with the lighting of the human spirit. His message is: "People can't stand up to the world alone, they got to be together."

His next novel was *The Stone Country* (1967), a story of bleak walls, dark corridors and clanging doors distilled from his prison experiences; followed by *In the Fog of the Seasons' End* (1972), recounting the danger and daring of work in the underground, and *Time of the Butcherbird* (1979), dealing with the people's resistance to the threat of forced removal to a bantustan. In addition to writing many short stories, Alex La Guma also edited *Apartheid*, a collection of writings on South African racism by South Africans, and after extensive travels in the Soviet Union, *A Soviet Journey* in 1978. He wrote many other pieces besides, and was busy on a new work at the time of his death.

It was the mixture of realism and optimism which was the hallmark of Alex La Guma's work. He faced life squarely and did not try to hide its nastiness for those at the bottom of the tip, but always retained his confidence that working together, the oppressed people could transform their world, end the nightmare of capitalism, exploitation, racism and prejudice and build a new world based on rationality and co-operation. But he was not a preacher. He was essentially a story-teller with a sharp eye for detail and a warm sense of humour. There was no malice in him.

His Optimism

In one of the first pieces he wrote for the newspaper *New Age* (August 30, 1956), Alex looked at the plight of the Coloured people of Cape Town.

"There is a story told among the old people which says that one day, many years ago, God summoned White Man and Coloured Man and placed two boxes before them. One box was very big and the other small. God then turned to Coloured Man and told him to choose one of the boxes. Coloured Man immediately chose the bigger and left the other to White Man. When he opened his box, Coloured man found a pick and shovel inside it; White Man found gold in his box.

"The people have many explanations for their lot. Some of these take the form of folk tales, superstitions and myths; others are downright logical. But in all there is

the common consciousness that oppression, suffering and hardship are facts of life. And they have learned to temper hardship with humour, and to sweeten the bitter pill of their drab lives with the honey of a satirical philosophy. But always they have been aware of pain. . . .

“The census declares that we are almost one and a quarter million. But if you identify a people, not by names and the colour of their skin, but by hardship and joy, pleasure and suffering, cherished hopes and broken dreams, the grinding monotony of toil without gain, despair and starvation, illiteracy, tuberculosis and malnutrition, laughter and vice, ignorance, genius, superstition, ageless wisdom and undying confidence, love and hatred, then you will have to give up counting. People are like identical books with only different dust-jackets. The title and the text are the same.

“And since man is only human, he must rise in the morning, throw off the blanket of night and look at the sun”.

On May 23 last year (1985), by decree of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Alex La Guma was awarded the Order of the Friendship of the Peoples. Presenting the order in the Kremlin in Moscow, B.A. Ashimov, Deputy Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, said 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, Asia and other countries and in the cause of world peace.

In reply, Comrade La Guma said that he received this distinguished tribute in all humility, recalling that the Soviet Union in 1985 was remembering the millions of lives lost during the Great Patriotic War which had ended 40 years earlier when Nazism, racism and Hitlerite terror had been defeated. Today the peoples of Africa, Asia and the Americas were engaged in a similar struggle against the forces of fascism, racism and oppression, he said. African and Asian writers had done much to promote friendship and understanding among peoples and men of letters, and would not stand idly by while the forces of reaction and war tried to push mankind towards a nuclear cataclysm. “No effort must be spared to save our planet from obliteration”, he said.

A few months later our comrade was no more, but his life and work will not be forgotten. The following message was cabled to Blanche La Guma on October 14:

“The Central Committee and all members of the South African Communist Party send heartfelt condolences to you and the family on the sad loss of Alex. He devoted his life to the fight for the liberation of the South African people and the advance to socialism, contributing not only through his writings, but also in his everyday political work inside South Africa and after being forced to leave the country. Alex was in every sense a worthy ambassador of our people, a staunch supporter of the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries, an internationalist and fighter for peace, a lovely human being, friend and comrade who will be deeply missed by all who knew him. The SACP dips its red banner in honour of this loyal and dedicated son of the people.”