

Reflections on Joel Joffe – Dr Nick Maurice

To speak about Joel Joffe in the 10 minutes I have been allowed is impossible, he was a man of such diversity, humility, humour and humanity not to mention generosity and I can categorically say my greatest and closest friend, who I loved dearly.

Joel was perhaps best known globally for being a member of the defence council of Nelson Mandela and his nine co-defendants at the Rivonia trial in 1963 which resulted in them not receiving the death penalty but rather in Mandela's case 27 years of imprisonment on Robben Island. The recent death of Winnie Mandela reminds me that it was she who asked Joel to defend Mandela after he had been caught and imprisoned before the trial.

Joel told the story of how on one occasion when he met Mandela as President of South Africa, Mandela with a twinkle in his eye introduced Joel to a friend in the room saying "Meet Joel Joffe, the man who had me put away for 27 years".

As a result of his defence of Mandela, Joel was shunned by white friends and fellow lawyers. He had his South African passport confiscated and in 1964 he and Vanetta his wife left South Africa and came to Britain where he teamed up with a close friend from University days, and a fellow Jew, Mark Weinberg to form Hambro Life Assurance in Swindon. This was later to become Allied Dunbar and much later was bought out by Zurich Financial Services. I think it would be fair to say that St James' Place for which our Chair works as head of corporate social responsibility was started as an offshoot of Allied Dunbar.

Joel was the greatest of philanthropists and one of the leaders of the corporate social responsibility movement to the extent that Tony Blair when Prime Minister asked Joel if he would chair the so-called Giving Campaign, which was set up to explore why philanthropy from the private sector in the UK was so far behind that of the United States. It was as a result of the work of that campaign that CSR and payroll giving took on a national platform.

In the early days of MBG Hambro Life supported our work through regular donations thanks to Joel and his absolute grasp of what we stood for namely trying to get away from the, if you are not very careful, patronising approach of "we must help these poor people in Africa" to the understanding that we

might have as much to learn from friends in that continent as they might have to learn from us. It would be an exaggeration to say that without that funding we would not be sitting here this evening but it helped significantly not simply in terms of the money but also the affirmation we received from a major organisation committed to what we were trying to achieve.

I first got to know Joel really well when we were both appointed Trustees of Oxfam and used to drive to meetings together (he by his own admission was not a good driver) and were never short of global topics to discuss. Indeed we competed against each other when we and one other fellow trustee were asked if we would consider becoming Chair of Oxfam. Following a rather rigorous interview by fellow trustees, I was delighted that Joel got the job and not me as I was still in full time general practice in Marlborough. Joel later got his own back on me by asking me to be a trustee of his family trust the Joffe Charitable Trust.

Joel was of course made a Peer (initially Labour but later cross bench) and he and I worked together on the Joffe Bill on Assisted Dying, a subject on which we both felt extremely passionate and which got me into some trouble with the national press back in 1997.

My ten minutes is nearly up but I would like to finish with an anecdote.

In 1999 Penny Lawrence was the excellent International Programmes Director of VSO later to become Deputy Chief Executive at Oxfam. She recently and tragically felt she had to resign over the Haiti scandal which had taken place on her watch.

As a sign of MBG's growing national reputation as a lead agency in the world of North South Partnerships in 1999 and our experience in hosting young people from Africa, Penny wrote asking if we would be prepared to host a group of 14 young people from UK and Nkowakowa a community in South Africa as VSO's first step into a new programme which they were jointly running with the Prince's Trust entitled International Volunteer Exchange.

This exchange programme involved a diverse group of young people from all over the UK who would spend three months in two communities in South Africa, pairing up with young people of the same age there and getting

involved as volunteers in a community project. At the end of the three months the UK and South African young people would return to UK and spend three months, still in their pairs, living with families in two communities here.

We were flattered to be invited by VSO to host 14 members of the group, the rest being cared for in Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire. The group was engaged in a number of activities in the town including cleaning the river Kennet with waders provided by Marlborough College, spending time working alongside people with disabilities and meeting and visiting the elderly. This was of course in the days when there was no difficulty in getting visas for young Africans to come to UK.

One significant event during their stay that will remain with me forever was a meeting I organised between the 7 black South Africans in the group one of whom was studying law in Cape Town and Joel Joffe.

I had asked Joel if he would come and talk to them about his role in Apartheid South Africa and in particular as attorney in the Rivonia trial in 1963.

I had not told the group about the man they were about to meet. We sat over a cup of tea in the meeting room at the top of the MBG offices in 1A London Road, until Joel arrived smiling, I can see him now, carrying with him a large plastic bag and greeting each of the young as they introduced themselves to him.

Joel, with his usual, profound humility, began by quietly saying that he was of Jewish origin his parents having originally come from Lithuania and settled in South Africa where he was born and brought up. He talked of how he had trained as a lawyer, his involvement in the anti-apartheid movement and how he had been invited to be attorney in the Rivonia trial.

As he began to intimately describe the trial I could see the pupils of the eyes of the eight young South Africans widening and their jaws almost literally dropping as they began to appreciate that they were in the presence of a great man who had played an integral part in the history of South Africa. They could not believe that here we were in a small office in a small market town in UK listening to the testament of such a central figure in their country's recent

past, albeit a past that had taken place before they had been born, but in which their lives had been intimately intertwined.

Joel talked in graphic detail about the trial and the four charges.

Joel quoted the famous three hour long speech of Mandela which he Joel had helped to fashion, but had been very concerned that Mandela's final words might encourage the death penalty and asked Mandela to remove them. He refused! I quote...

"During my lifetime I have dedicated my life to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realised. But, my Lord, if it needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die."

Joel talked to the young South Africans in the room about the aftermath of the trial and how he agreed with Bram Fischer, the lead advocate, that the two of them should travel from Pretoria to Robben Island to talk with Mandela and see if he wanted to appeal.

He told how Bram drove with his wife Mollie who was, in her own right a strong and brave activist in the human rights and antiapartheid movement and a supporter of the communist party. She had been detained for her activities for 90 days and was involved in a hunger strike for that period.

Joel told the desperate story of how on their journey to Cape Town after the trial, which was in part to celebrate their daughter's 21st birthday, Bram and Mollie had been involved in an accident when a cow wandered into the road and in avoiding it the car overturned into a river and Mollie was drowned.

On arrival in Mandela's cell on Robben Island a few days later, and after some discussion, Mandela asked after Mollie at which point Bram hurriedly left the cell to compose himself in his grief and then returned a few moments later with the words "Now, where were we? Are you going to appeal against your sentence or not?" The answer from Nelson Mandela was an emphatic "No!"

By this time, the group in our small meeting room in Marlborough was completely gripped and nothing surely could have inspired them more than listening to this central figure in the history of their country.

But at that moment Joel reached down to the plastic bag he had brought with him and drew out a folder containing the original transcript of his 3 hour speech of the Rivonia trial, written by Mandela in his own handwriting and which Joel had said to Mandela he would care of and take with him when he left South Africa, given its huge historical significance.

When Joel left South Africa for Britain, he brought the papers with him. Some forty years later he subsequently in 2003 handed the transcript back to now President Mandela standing next to him on the stage at the opening ceremony of the Bram Fischer Memorial Library at the Legal Resources Centre in Johannesburg.

The young people in our office could not believe their eyes and gasped when they saw and were allowed to touch Mandela's handwritten speech at the trial. I meanwhile felt that this was one of the most significant and moving encounters that I had ever witnessed.

The following year Joel gave a fascinating lecture to members of the Marlborough Brandt Group in St John's School entitled "Bram Fisher and Nelson Mandela – Comrades in Arms" I would be happy to share that lecture with you if you are interested.

In the death last year of Joel whose cremation service I was privileged to take - Joel was an atheist and did not want either a Rabbi or Priest to take the service - we have all lost a great friend and supporter and an exceptional human being.

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