

# Sak

Len Sak left (he doesn't like the word retired — it suggests a last phase) Sowetan this year after nearly four decades of cartooning for South African newspapers. But Sak, best known for his character, Jojo, has no plans for quietly shuffling off into obscurity. Rather, he is hard at work on an informal education comic which combines Jojo with the other great interest of his life — the study of history.

If all goes well, South Africans should soon be reintroduced to Jojo the commentator, a man who falls asleep reading about the history of Africa, and in his dreams, meets up with the characters in his book. So, fans can expect Soweto's inimitable egghead to be totally unfazed when, while floating in an inner tube off Clifton beach, he meets a Phoenician galley.

Did the Phoenicians actually make it that far? "I'm not sure. But the idea is to use Jojo to make history accessible. I have drawn historical reconstructions before. Tim Tuck, set in the frontier wars period of the Eastern Cape and published in *The Weekend Argus* as a comic strip in 1959, and *The Secret Tunnel*, a series about the persecution of Jews in Spain, which I published myself in 1963 in a comic called *Gibor*, were two earlier attempts at this.

"I think fictional characters are a very good way of telling a story of the past. *Gibor* lasted four issues before I ran out of money — it should have taken off but didn't. I launched it in the 1960's when Apartheid was getting dug in, the parallel was there, and I was concerned also to try to convey something of what was going on at the time.

"Tim Tuck was a celebration of my love of that part of the country — I was born in Port Elizabeth. The story enabled me to develop my drawing ability. It was too wordy, the story line too naive, but very exciting venture for me. But it was badly paid frankly. The first 10 years were a terrible struggle — six guineas for a page of work, Tim Tuck paid 14. They thought it was an astronomical sum then but I remember it was always a struggle to come out.

"I never did commercial art, it would have been more sensible to combine with advertising work and I was approached. But I knowingly shunned

it, a sort of purist sense I suppose, a bit pretentious, but I really did want to do cartooning.

"I used to go out and look for work, but there were papers I didn't want to work for. Horace Flather asked me to work for *The Star* but I turned them down as too conservative then.

"I love humour, but if I could start over the thing that keeps tugging at my sleeve is that, if I have the ability to tell a story, then I think it is terribly important to convey history to people."

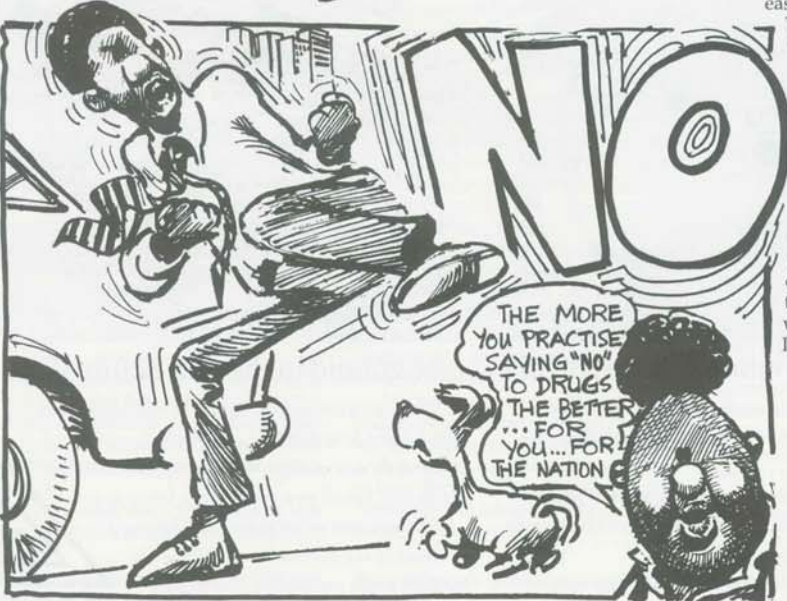
*The Secret Tunnel*, ended up as a page in the *Zionist Record* for about six months. Sak also had a strip, *Pletzl*, featuring a character remarkably similar to Jojo, in the *Record* and the *SA Jewish Chronicle*. The publications are two of many to have accepted his work down the years: He drew for *Rhodeo*, the Rhodes University student paper during his time on campus, *Bantu World*, *Brandwag*, *Golden City Post*, *Sunday Times*, *The World*, *Elethu Mirror*, the old Liberal Party paper *Contact* edited by Patrick Duncan and the British comic, *Princess*.

The work for *Princess* came about in 1964 after a pilgrimage to London, seen by Sak as the home of cartooning. He found a job with *Fleetway Publications*, producers of about 20 childrens' weekly comics. "Tim Tuck helped when I went over — the *Fleetway* people were impressed. The whole system was a production line, everything was specialised, somebody else did the balloons. It made me realise how privileged I was in South Africa. I could have established myself there but creatively I needed to relate to something that was part of me so I returned to South Africa after a year.

"I started drawing for *Contact* at the time of Sharpeville. We were in complete agreement as to what was to be criticised. Duncan gave me editorial freedom and the period was a fruitful one. It was a happy liaison — if Duncan liked a cartoon he would send me a telegram."

Sak's association with the controversial *Elethu Mirror* was in the form of the sexy adventurer Honey, an outrageous and bizarre strip with a black femme fatale as the heroine. Humphrey Tyler edited the *Mirror* at the time.

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Jojo often delivered a strong social message



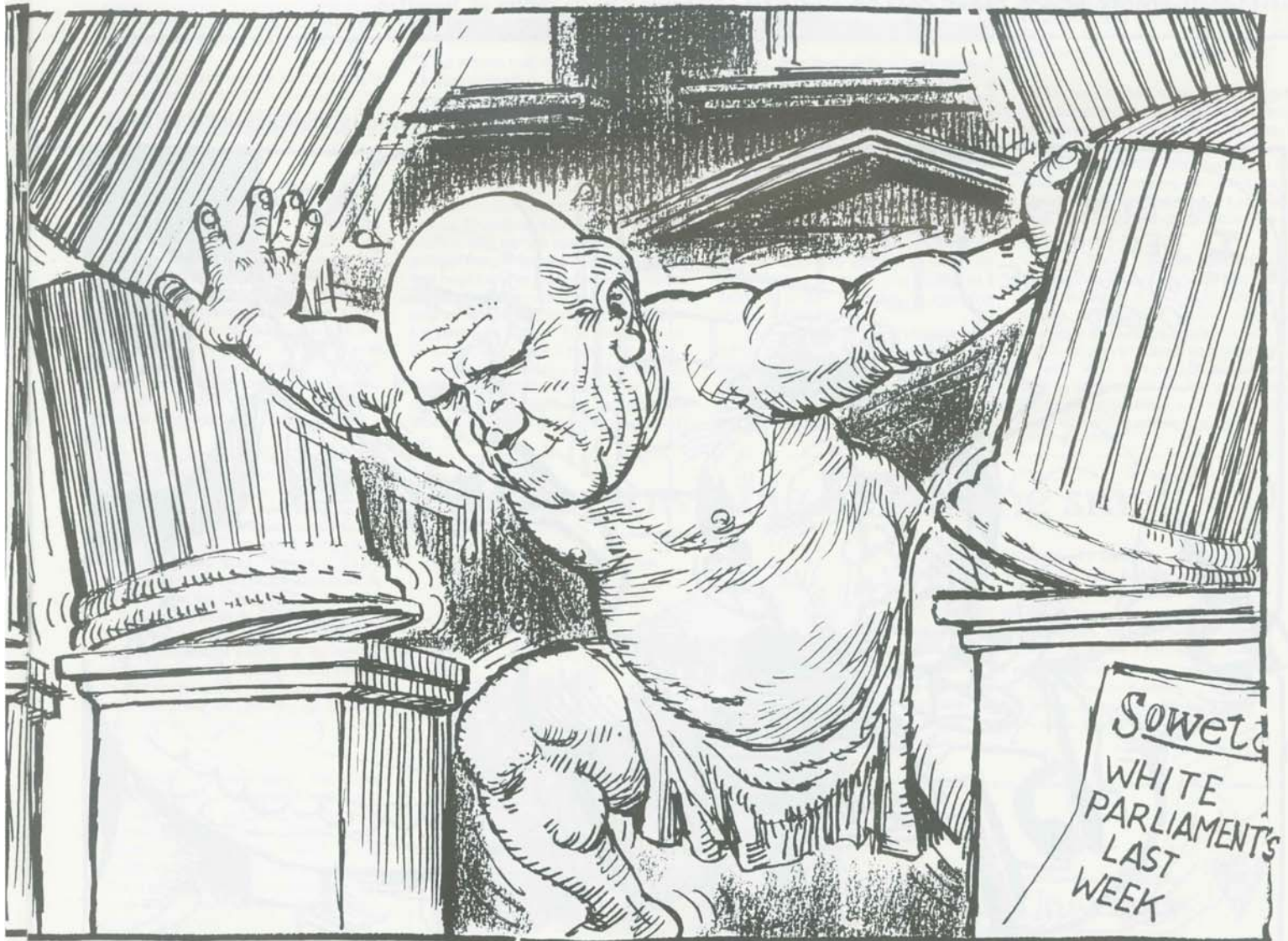
Mr. Editor, I'm calling for the winding up of apartheid.

Sak predicted the fall of white rule in 1961 (above) and was able to cartoon its eventual demise (below)

In 1964 Sak produced *Gibor*, a Jewish educational comic



"Mr editor there is something I do not understand. Months back, a few readers made enquiries about Sojo's full name and address. These were enthusiastic readers of both sexes, who for reasons best known to themselves were keen to get in touch with Sojo. Nevertheless, they were duly informed that Sojo was a 'happily married man' and, therefore his identity could not be revealed. Quite understandable. Another reader has asked that a photo of Sojo and his family be published in *The World*. The answer: 'Unfortunately Sojo is a bachelor'. Come on Mr Editor, clear this confusion!" Letter from a *World* reader 21 February 1967.



"He could be eccentric and abrasive, but he understood the medium of cartoons. Honey was important to me as a developmental experiment."

Then, of course, there was Drum. It was in Drum (and the West African editions) that Jojo first made his appearance in 1959 under another editor who understood the cartoon medium, Tom Hopkinson. Jojo has changed little since — his characteristic rolled-up shirt sleeves, braces and egg-shaped head were well-established by the time the strip went on hold after Hopkinson left in 1961.

Jojo was recalled by M T Moerane, then editor of World, in 1965 and the strip was a regular feature of the paper until it was banned in 1977. By that time Jojo had established himself as a township legend and had had a printing press named after him and a song written in his honour (by Zakes Nkosi and his City Jazz Nine). On the day World was taken off the streets Jojo made a front page appearance in The Star before reappearing 10 days later in The Argus' response to the banning, the Post and Weekend Post.

Sak was critical of apartheid from the start and Jojo never ceased to chide the authorities. "I was convinced it was impossible to keep anything so unworthy and wrong going. It seemed inevitably wrong to me."

When Jojo finally retired from the Sowetan in 1994 Len Maseko, the news editor, was inundated with letters from readers asking that he come back. Noted one writer, Solly Manthata: "Len Sak knew how to put our day-to-day township life down in a single picture. In his cartoons we used to see and laugh at ourselves. Sometimes his cartoons would make us proud of ourselves or even angry at ourselves...It is heart-breaking and disappointing to think that Jojo had been with us throughout our struggle for liberation and he parts ways with us when we have reached our destination."



Kieste, an Afrikaans cartoon, was "recycled" for Gibor

*"Len Sak is among those exceptional white people who have the indefinable and untranslatable black ethic called ubuntu."* Aggrey Klaaste, editor of Sowetan.

Spring cleaning. One of Sak's favourite drawings of FW de Klerk

