

Accused Number Five

How I became lifelong friends with George Bizos

by Gcina Malindi SC

As a young political activist in the Vaal Triangle I knew George by reputation before I met him. I first met George in 1981 when he represented Khotso Seatlholo at the Vanderbijlpark Magistrate's Court. During one of the lunch adjournments I, together with two or three other Congress of South African Students members, walked with Khotso's legal team to a nearby restaurant. At the entrance to the restaurant we indicated that we would walk back to court as blacks were not allowed in the whites-only restaurant. George told us to enter with him. The white woman behind the counter walked quickly towards the door, presumably to stop us from entering. Upon noticing George she "apologised" that it was a whites-only restaurant but immediately indicated that she would allocate a special table for George. George proceeded to point out the table he wanted and he was not challenged. We sat together with him to enjoy lunch with the advocate that we held in high regard for being a struggle lawyer.

It was a quick four years from that day to being represented by George, Arthur Chaskalson, Zak Yacoob, Karel Tip and Gilbert Marcus in the Delmas Treason Trial. I was Accused Number Five. After a few consultations George told Caroline Nicholls (an attorney from Priscilla Jana & Associates) to assign me and Thabiso Ratsomo to help the other co-accused to prepare for our trial. I worked closely with



Gcina Malindi SC on his release from Robben Island in 1989

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George for the next three years until the end of the trial. It was the beginning of a friendship that started then, continued over the year that I was out on bail and after I was released from Robben Island in 1989 and lasted until his death on 9 September 2020.

George's friendship with some of the Delmas accused endured until his death. Caroline and I became very close to George. It was to him that we first confessed our relationship. In January 1989 after I was convicted and sentenced it was George who came to the Pretoria Maximum Prison in order to give me the news that a healthy daughter was born to Caroline and me in the early hours of 24 January 1989. He agreed to be my daughter's godfather. My family was automatically invited to George's lamb spit braai Sunday lunches.

After I studied law and joined the Johannesburg Bar I became one of George's juniors in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Amnesty Committee hearings. We held the brief in *Derby-Lewis and Janus Walus v The TRC*, representing the Hani family and the South African Communist Party until George could no longer appear in court due to frailty. I still hold the brief.

I must mention one thing about George. For him there was no political trial that was too big or too small. There was no political trial important enough or less important to him. He acted for

people who had been arrested under the pass laws with the same vigour, diligence and commitment as he did for Mandela, Winnie, Sisulu, the Biko family and the Timol family. He defended the Alexandra "backyard" schools which were established in defiance of Bantu Education, which were called "social clubs".

During the Delmas Trial George earned himself the nickname "Matla a Tlou", which means strength of an elephant. He told us at the beginning of the trial that those with stamina will emerge victorious at the end of the trial. Indeed, George's stamina earned us the acquittal of eight accused, nine suspended sentences and the setting aside of the convictions and sentences of the five that were sentenced to direct imprisonment.

I am proud to have known George whose motto was: "If it is about justice I will be involved." As a result, he was a member or an active supporter of all organisations that were involved in the struggle for democracy, human rights and justice. Very few lawyers matched George's commitment to justice, freedom and to South Africa.