

# George Bizos – the Hercules of his time

by **Mahomed Navsa**, Judge of Appeal

I first met George Bizos in 1982 at Innes Chambers, when I was Denis Kuny's pupil. They were working on the Aggett inquest. When I first met George, I was immediately struck by his passion for justice, his commitment to human rights and his love of his Hellenic heritage. He loved discussing the great Greek philosophers, quoting them at length. He was steeped in Greek mythology. George was proud to be South African and committed to the struggle against apartheid's most egregious ills.

I recall the first and subsequent days of the Aggett inquest. George was a commanding court presence who would not be denied. He had a sense of occasion and was unstoppable in court. He imposed himself on proceedings and dictated what the newspaper headlines would say. His forensic skills were exceptional.

George and I and Clive Plasket, now Judge of Appeal, worked together for some 14 months on what became known as the Goniwe inquest – the inquest into the death of the Cradock 4; Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkhonto and Sicelo Mhlauli. It was conducted in Port Elizabeth with Justice Neville Zietsman presiding. It was really the first time that South Africa's public at large got a better and more detailed view of how insidious and how far the terrible tentacles of the apartheid security state extended.

George was the leading light in showing how assassination orders were issued by securocrats with calculated ruthlessness, and how the security establishment controlled so many aspects of our daily lives without always being visible.

George and I and Nicolette Moodie, a fellow at the Legal Resources Centre, travelled to Port Elizabeth every Sunday and we flew back to Johannesburg every Friday over the many months that the inquest endured.



George Bizos with Sydney Kentridge outside the Old Synagogue in Pretoria, August 1970

George was an irresistible force in that inquest and was intent on showing the public the horrors of the apartheid State. We felt sorry for Judge Zietsman, a decent man, who was horrified at what was being presented by George in a not understated manner.

Our legal team also regularly witnessed the generous and warm side of George's nature. He treated us twice a week, a break from the Elizabeth Hotel's buffet, to dinner at Greek restaurants in Port Elizabeth, which he commandeered. He regaled us with tales of prior court battles and with personalities at the Bar and his battles with authorities.

I worked with him on a number of cases over the years. It was not an easy task being his junior. It was often a roller-coaster ride. He was a genius cross-examiner but was also unpredictable. I think he often surprised himself with new ideas that popped into his head, sending the rest of his legal team scurrying to keep up. His real strength in court was that he understood better than most how the world worked and what drove people to act as they did.

I also witnessed over the years the unbreakable and unique friendship he shared with Arthur Chaskalson. Temperamentally they were like chalk and cheese, the one given to detail and precision, the other given to flair and drama. You do not have to guess who was which. They spoke almost daily and shared secrets and

memories. George acknowledged Arthur's genius and clearly adored Arthur and trusted his judgment.

Over the decades, close to half a century, that I got to know and appreciate George Bizos, I enjoyed his sense of humour and mischief and his generosity. At every end of year LRC function he treated staff to his lamb on the spit, Greek style, prepared at Sydney Kentridge's house in Houghton. George loved food and would give lessons to all willing to listen, on how to prepare calamari and other dishes.

George Bizos was a great teacher. He was a wonderfully generous man. He was a giant amongst giants. In a world in which the word "hero" is overused it does not even begin to describe him.

Even when he took on an unpopular case, which some of his friends criticised him for, he was unrepentant, refusing to apologise for defending his client to the hilt.

The country will not be the same without him. The legal world is the poorer without him. There will be less colour in our lives. Court corridors will be less lively. But I know he is smiling down on us, willing us to be better and to overcome the many challenges we face.

George's contribution to the development of a human rights culture in our country is immeasurable. He truly lived a good life.

I owe George more than I could ever repay, as do many of my generation. I will miss him dearly. Go well, George!!