

## ***Introduction***

***George lived for 92 eventful and hugely productive years. His autobiography, published in 2007, runs to over 600 pages and is supplemented by his other published work. This brief obituary is by necessity a highly selective summary of his achievements and work with and for many remarkable people. It has been written with affection and great respect, and we apologise for any omissions. As a family we are incredibly proud of his courage, dedication and unflinching commitment to justice, which was grounded in passion, wit and empathetic humanity. We celebrate the life of George, lived so well, and with boundless energy, optimism and selflessness. He served so many in the cause of justice. We will remember him and are very grateful for the many kind messages from the individuals and communities that George's life and work embraced. Well done, Rest in Peace, Dad, Papou, Uncle George.***

## ***Early life and education in Greece***

George Bizos was born to Antonios (known to family and friends as Andoni) Bizos and Anastasia Bizos (née Tomara) on November 15th 1927 in the village of Vasilitsi, south of Koroni and Kalamata in Messinia, Greece. George's birth date has sometimes been recorded and reported as December 26th 1928: for some years his father deliberately suggested George was a little younger to try to protect him from the risk of conscription into the war. Andoni and Anastasia farmed olives, and George was the first of their four children who survived infancy. Andoni served as mayor of the village for a period, arranging for the first road connection and for water pipes to be laid. He was deposed as mayor in the 1930s when the right-wing Metaxas government came to power.

George attended primary school in Vasilitsi and Koroni. In Vasilitsi he was taught by Mrs Eugenia Kotsakis, a refugee from Asia Minor, and the families became close. George boarded with the Kotsakis family when he started secondary school in Kalamata, befriending their son George. The two Georges planned careers as seafarers and George Kotsakis later became a captain in the Merchant Navy. They remained lifelong friends and they met whenever George the captain's ship docked in Durban harbour.

## ***Escape from Greece and arrival in South Africa***

George's schooling in Kalamata ended when Italy declared war on Greece in October 1940. In May 1941, at the age of 13, George, his father, and others from the village, helped seven New Zealand soldiers who were hiding in the hills outside the village, to escape from Nazi-occupied Greece. They bought a rowing boat in the nearby port town of Koroni and attempted to row to Crete, 135 nautical miles away. They were adrift for three days before managing to attract the attention of a British destroyer, the HMS Kimberley, which was part of Lord Mountbatten's fleet. As Crete had by then fallen to the German invaders, they were taken to a refugee camp in Alexandria. George attended the Kaniskero School of the Patriarchy of the Greek Orthodox Church for some months. When it appeared that Egypt would fall to Rommel's forces, his father took the decision to evacuate to South Africa. They travelled on the Ile de France through the Suez Canal and down the East Coast of Africa, a journey fraught with danger due to U-boat activity.

They disembarked in Durban and travelled with other refugees by train to Johannesburg. They were taken to Braamfontein railway station because it was feared that the pro-Nazi Ossewa Brandwag would be demonstrating at Johannesburg Central Station. The Ossewa Brandwag blamed Jan Smuts for bringing the “vuilgoed” (rubbish) of Europe to South Africa. The local Greek community helped integrate the Bizoses.

### ***Education in South Africa***

Attempts were made to settle George in school, initially at Pretoria Boys High School, but unable to speak English or Afrikaans, this was not a success. He then worked for board and lodging as a shop assistant at a Greek convenience corner shop in Johannesburg, until a teacher from a local school, Cecilia Feinstein, recognised him as the refugee who had been mentioned with a photograph in a local newspaper. She scolded the owner of the shop and insisted that George attend school the next day whereupon he went to Malvern Junior High and then later Athlone Boys High School matriculating in 1947, a few years older than his classmates.

George’s father wanted him to study medicine, but he decided to do law instead. In 1948, the year that the National Party was voted into power in South Africa, he was accepted to study for a BA at the University of the Witwatersrand and later studied for his LLB. It was at Wits that he became politically active and he served on the Wits Students’ Representative Council.

### ***Personal life***

After graduating, George married Arethe Ekaterini Daflos, a Johannesburg-born art student from a Greek family. They were married for over 60 years until she passed away on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017. They set up home in Parktown North in the late 1950s and had three sons, Kimon, an Emergency Medicine Consultant resident in England, Damon, a Professor of Surgery at Wits, and Alexi, an engineer with a lighting business. George and Rita had seven grandchildren.

George helped his siblings to join him in South Africa. His brother Stavros, who died in 1994, ran a successful catering company in Johannesburg, his sister Vaso worked for a period in Johannesburg but returned to the village for retirement and passed away the day after George in September 2020, and John, who studied at Wits and who passed away in August 2020.

George’s mother Anastasia visited Johannesburg in the 1960s for about three years. On her initiative, whilst he was at work, she dug up a stretch of lawn to establish a substantial vegetable garden: as a result, George became a devoted gardener, finding time for quiet thought in tending the vegetables for many years. Many benefited from his vegetables, including clients in prison.

George’s home life was supported for the last twenty years by Thoko Phali, who together with her sons Duduzu and Mlindeli lived with George, and more recently, by Grant Lyton.

George was ably assisted in the garden for nearly six decades by the late Martin Mangwande.

### ***Legal career***

George joined the Johannesburg Bar in 1954.

As a personal friend of Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, he acted as an advocate for their law firm long before Tambo escaped into exile and Mandela went on trial. During the 1950s and 1960s he was Counsel to a wide range of well-known people including Trevor Huddleston of Sophiatown. He defended small communities, particularly in the western and eastern Transvaal, who were affected by apartheid laws that had been legislated and implemented by the Nationalist government. Notably, he acted for activists in Zeerust who protested against the extension of Pass Laws to women.

At the Rivonia trial of 1963-64 he and Arthur Chaskalson were junior members of the team, instructed by Joel Joffe and led by Bram Fischer and Vernon Berrangé, that defended Nelson Mandela and others. The accused were sentenced to life imprisonment but spared the death penalty. George is credited with advising Mandela to add the words "if needs be" before he said that he was prepared to die.

He defended Mac Maharaj in the "Little Rivonia Trial" later in 1964.

In 1966 George was led by Sydney Kentridge in defence of Bram Fischer. Bram had been a significant personal and professional influence in George's life.

In 1967 he defended Andimba Toivo ya Toivo and others who had been charged by South African authorities in connection with their activities in support of Namibian independence.

In 1976 he acted for the accused in the NUSAS trial, which ended with the acquittal of all accused, including Karel Tip and Charles Nupen, who later worked at the Legal Resources Centre.

George was Counsel for the families at numerous inquests into the deaths of people in detention, including for Ahmed Timol (who died in 1971), Steve Biko (who died in 1977) and Neil Aggett (who died in 1982). George's book, *No One to Blame?*, describes how these cases were a miscarriage of justice, which was borne out at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At the insistence of the Timol family, in 2018 the inquest into Timol's death was reopened and it was found that the security police were responsible and one of the surviving policemen, Joao Rodriguez, has now been charged with his murder.

George took silk in 1978 and became Senior Counsel at the Johannesburg Bar. He helped found the National Council of Lawyers for Human Rights in 1979.

In 1982 he defended Rob Adam, who had been charged with membership of the ANC.

From the mid 1980s Nelson Mandela asked George to be his emissary for discussions about the transition to a post- apartheid South Africa with the exiled leadership of the African National Congress.

At the Delmas Treason Trial, from 1985 to 1989, he represented Patrick (known as Terror) Lekota and Popo Molefe.

He represented Winnie Madikizela-Mandela on more than 20 occasions from the late fifties to 1992.

George also defended Albertina Sisulu and Barbara Hogan.

George served as a judge on Botswana's Court of Appeal from 1985 to 1993.

Although he never joined the African National Congress, he acted for Nelson Mandela and others *pro deo* on many occasions. In 1990 he became a member of the African National Congress's Legal and Constitutional Committee and at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) he served as adviser to the negotiating teams and participated in drawing up the Interim Constitution. He was involved in drafting legislation, particularly the Truth and Reconciliation Bill and amendments to the Criminal Procedure Act, to bring it into line with Chapter 3 of the Constitution, guaranteeing fundamental human rights to all citizens of South Africa.

George officially joined the Legal Resources Centre in 1991, at the request of his long-time colleague and friend, Arthur Chaskalson. He continued to work as Senior Counsel from the LRC, supporting the work of its Constitutional Litigation Unit, mentoring junior lawyers inside and outside the LRC, some of whom became senior in the profession and in the judiciary.

At the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, he was the leader of the team that opposed applications for amnesty on behalf of the Biko, Hani, Goniwe, Calata, Mkonto, Mhlauli, Slovo and Schoon families.

He was appointed by President Mandela to the Judicial Services Commission which, in terms of the Constitution, recommends candidates for appointment as judges and proposes reforms to the judicial system to enable it to transcend its apartheid past. He led the team for the South African government which successfully argued that the death penalty was unconstitutional. He led the legal team for the Government which ensured that that the Constitution was adopted by the Constitutional Court.

George was a lifelong campaigner against the use of the death penalty, and led the team that acted for the Government arguing that the death penalty was unconstitutional.

In 2003/4 George defended Zimbabwean opposition politician Morgan Tsvangirai, who was charged with high treason by the Zimbabwean government. Tsvangirai was acquitted in October 2004.

In 2005, he was legal adviser to Nelson Mandela in a legal dispute with Mandela's former lawyer, Ismail Ayob.

As an immigrant to the country with personal experience of his own struggle against prejudice, George represented the Chinese Association of South Africa in a case that ended in 2008 when Chinese South Africans were granted “previously disadvantaged” status, thus qualifying them for Black Economic Empowerment benefits.

George also led the LRC’s legal interventions on behalf of the families of those slain at Marikana: initiating the independent forensic work that exposed the horrors of the massacre and playing a significant role in placing evidence before the Farlam Inquiry into the killings.

### ***SAHETI school***

George placed a high value on inclusive education and Hellenism. He worked for many years to establish SAHETI School in Johannesburg in 1974. When he was asked why he worked to support SAHETI after it was too late for his own sons to attend, he answered that his grandchildren would go there, and indeed three of them did. The Johannesburg Hellenic community had tried for many years to establish sustainable schools in various parts of Johannesburg and its environs. After the acquisition of a 72-acre farm in Senderwood, Bedfordview, George took up chairmanship of the board of SAHETI and worked with the committee to raise substantial funds from Hellenes throughout South Africa. The constitution of SAHETI was drafted by Sydney Kentridge and was unique at the time as it was non-exclusionist. The children of Chris Hani, who was assassinated at the dawn of democracy, attended the school on George’s advice. A scholarship fund has been established in his name.

### ***Parthenon Sculptures***

George was an avid member of the Committees for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, both in South Africa and the UK.

### ***The George Bizos Human Rights Award***

In 2018 the Legal Resources Centre (LRC) inaugurated the George Bizos Human Rights Award. The George Bizos Human Rights Award, which will be presented annually, seeks to recognise those making a remarkable contribution towards protecting, upholding and advancing a culture of human rights in South Africa. The LRC hopes that this Award will serve as further inspiration for human rights lawyers and all those who work tirelessly in the public interest.

Launching this Award, the LRC recognised George for his outstanding work and unwavering commitment to holding those in power accountable for any abuse, towards South Africa’s constitutional democracy and for the realisation of the rights enshrined in the Constitution. The Award also celebrates the life of “Uncle George”, as he was affectionately known by his

friends and colleagues, and his dedication to the country's journey to freedom. In 2019 the recipient of this award was Deputy Chief Justice Dikgang Moseneke.

### ***Selected awards***

- Order for Meritorious Service Class II Medal, from President Mandela, 1999
- Commander of the Order of the Phoenix, appointed by the President of Greece for contribution to Hellenism and the teaching of Greek
- International Trial Lawyer Prize of the Year, International Academy of Trial Lawyers, 2001
- Bernard Simons Memorial Award, International Bar Association, 2004 (nominated by President Mandela and others)
- Sir Sydney and Lady Felicia Kentridge Award for Service to Law in Southern Africa, from the General Council of the Bar, 2004
- Duma Nokwe Human Rights and Democracy Award 2004
- LLD (Honoris Causa) (Natal)
- LLD (Honoris Causa) (Wits)
- LLD (Honoris Causa) (Port Elizabeth)
- Further Honorary doctorates from UCT, Pretoria, Rhodes, Cyprus, Vaal Triangle Technikon
- Johannesburg Bar, Honorary Life Member, October 2004
- Freedom of the City of London
- Freedom of the City of Johannesburg
- Freedom of the City of Athens
- Honorary President of Hands Off Cain, an international body advocating the abolition of the death penalty
- Appointed Ambassador for Hellenism by the Prefect of Attica and Athens in 2006
- Appointed Honorary member of the Athens Bar in 1994

### ***Publications***

*No One to Blame? In Pursuit of Justice in South Africa, 1998*

*Odyssey to Freedom, 2007*

*65 Years of Friendship, 2017*

---

**End**