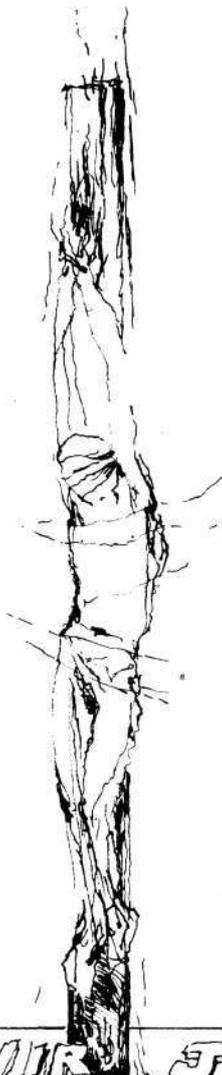


DEATH OF A LEADER

by Ivor Shapiro



ONS VIR JOU
SUID AFRIKA

Bram Fischer is dead. He died, it seems, with thousands of admirers, hundreds of friends and no allies in his own country.

This would probably be a stranger's impression after reading the South African press since Ascension Day. Since 7 May, when the 67-year old communist leader died after a long fight against cancer, all but the last six weeks of which was fought inside prison, there have been dozens of obituaries, tributes and eulogies. He has been called, by the governing National Party's Cape Town mouthpiece, "a supreme and extreme of a type . . . with a vision and an ideal . . . the intellect, the experience, the magnetism of a great leader . . ."

The policeman who twice arrested Abram Louis Fischer has described him as a "real gentleman, and tragic figure . . . a brilliant advocate with nice manners."

Editorials and obituaries in the liberal and right-wing press have pointed to his "brilliant mind", his qualities of leadership, his gentle, loving and compassionate nature.

At Fischer's non-religious cremation ceremony, writer Andre Brink spoke about "the broadening and liberating influence of men like Bram Fischer." He had enlarged and deepened the concept of the Afrikaans people.

And almost in unison the messages ended, as that of a member of parliament did, with a word of dissociation. ". . . And however strongly one disagreed with the road he walked and the means he chose to attain his ends—as many of us did—one could not but respect his determination and his dedication to a cause which he had persuaded himself was the right one."

To associate oneself with Bram Fischer's ideals, even after his death, would be to lay oneself open—as he did—to charges of furthering the aims of communism and invite prosecution—as he did—under the Suppression of Communism Act.

He was sentenced to 24 years' imprisonment under that law, and to life imprisonment under the Sabotage Act, on 9 May 1966. He had been convicted of conspiring with the African National Congress (ANC) and the militant Spear of the Nation organisation to aid and procure the commission of and to commit acts of sabotage. The court found that while acting as chairman of the South African Communist Party he had furthered the aims of that party, trained party organisers, distributed anti-government pamphlets, experimented with disguises, looked for prospective sites for sabotage, and distributed leaflets purporting to come from the ANC. There was also talk of wiping out isolated police posts, the court found.

In sentencing him, the judge said his activities had constituted a very serious threat to the safety of the State.

Fischer was a practicing advocate in Johannesburg when he and his wife Molly joined the Communist Party in the late 1930s. When the party was outlawed in 1950 he remained an active member of its underground organisation and was the party's representative at the 1952 World Peace Council in Austria. Despite these associations he was enough respected as a lawyer to be repeatedly elected to the Johannesburg Bar Council, representing the lawyers attached to the Supreme Court in South Africa's biggest city.

Fischer became widely known as a remarkable and dedicated lawyer when he appeared as senior defence advocate in the long Treason Trial of the 1950s, which resulted in acquittal for all the accused, and the Rivonia political trial of 1963, in which Nelson Mandela and seven other black leaders were sentenced to life imprisonment.

In 1964, the tide started turning against Bram Fischer. His wife died in a motor accident. He was arrested under the Suppression of Communism Act. Granted bail, he flew to London to defend and win a case before the Privy Council and returned to stand trial.

In January of the next year, he estreated bail and disappeared "to continue his work". He was struck off the roll of advocates.

Ten months later, after one of the biggest political manhunts in the country's history, he was re-arrested, heavily disguised, in Johannesburg. Unwilling to lie or implicate others, he refused to enter the witness box at his renewed trial and instead made a three-and-a-half-hour statement from the dock to justify his beliefs and actions. Then he was sentenced to life imprisonment. From that time until two months ago, he was in prison and prison hospitals. (In 1967 he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize.) After it became known that he had terminal cancer, repeated appeals for clemency from his allies outside South Africa and admirers within were ignored.

Dying, he was allowed a month under virtual house-arrest at his brother's home. An extension of another month had only half expired when doctors found further treatment could not help.

Most of the obituaries here have called his life "a tragic waste". Andre Brink's eulogy attacked this type of statement as an attempt to deny the meaning of his life—to discount it, distort it and doubt it. "His life was only tragic in the sense that tragedy requires a sacrifice before sanity and progress can be restored to a corrupt destructive society."

There must be some remaining communists in South Africa. Wherever they are, however, they could not be expected to make this the occasion to make themselves known. They mourn in silence.

There have been so many public tributes because Bram Fischer's life was a symbol of commitment, to a broader range of South Africans than the communists represent. Thousands of blacks and whites here remember him mainly for working for justice and liberation in an era when few white faces could be seen and fewer Afrikaans names heard in the ranks of those wanting equality in South Africa.

The quest for vengeance against Bram Fischer for betraying the Afrikaner nation, of one of whose proudest families he was a descendant, was pursued after his death. His family was allowed to arrange his funeral on three conditions. That it take place within a week of his death. That it be held in the city of Bloemfontein.

And that his ashes be handed back to the Department of Prisons. □