

## **CITATION FOR GEORGE BIZOS**

**Honorary graduand, Rhodes University, 8 April 2011**

By Professor Paul Maylam

If one was to single out the lawyer most involved in defending anti-apartheid activists and South African freedom-fighters over four decades from the mid-1950s, that lawyer would surely be George Bizos.

Let us consider for a moment the list of cases in which he has been involved, the notable figures he has defended or represented – a remarkable list which includes so many of the most prominent names in the history of South Africa's liberation movement: acting for defendants in the marathon treason trial from 1956 to '61; as counsel for Trevor Huddleston of Sophiatown; defending participants in protest marches against the hated pass system; member of the team that defended Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and others at the 1963-64 Rivonia trial (it has been suggested that the advice George Bizos gave to the defendants may have saved them from the death penalty – where would South Africa be today, one might ask, if the death penalty had been imposed?); then acting for Mac Maharaj at the subsequent Little Rivonia Trial, and for Bram Fischer at his trial; appearing at the inquests into the deaths of activists, Ahmed Timol, Steve Biko and Neil Aggett; defending women like Albertina Sisulu, Winnie Mandela and Barbara Hogan; acting for UDF leaders in the 1980s; representing the families of Biko, Chris Hani and the Cradock Four at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s, opposing the amnesty applications of those who had perpetrated the murder of these activists. Standing here tonight must be a veritable, walking historical archive.

If one was to go back 65 years or so one would probably not have foreseen George Bizos rising to such prominence in

South African affairs. After all he was unable to speak English before the age of thirteen. Born in Greece he came to South Africa in dramatic circumstances. In May 1941 George, aged twelve, together with his father, two other Greek men, and seven New Zealand soldiers set out in a fishing boat to escape German-occupied Greece. Sailing for two days against fierce winds, with a dwindling supply of food and water, they were fortunate to be rescued by a British destroyer. Dropped off in Egypt, they eventually made their way to Durban, then on to Johannesburg.

There George's prospects were not promising – working in a shop, not attending school for three years. Then came a second rescue. A teacher, Cecilia Feinstein, took him under her wing and helped him through school. Then followed a law degree at Wits – it was there that he first met Nelson Mandela, a fellow law student. And so was launched this distinguished legal career: becoming a member of the Johannesburg bar in 1954, and soon acting for clients of the legal practice established by Mandela and OR Tambo.

It is a career that has extended far into the post-apartheid era: acting as an adviser to the negotiating teams during the transition to democracy in the early 1990s; helping to draw up South Africa's new constitution and bill of rights; serving on the Judicial Services Commission to propose judicial reform and to recommend candidates for judicial office; playing a prominent role in arguing before the Constitutional Court that the death penalty was unconstitutional; leading the team that defended Morgan Tsvangirai at his treason trial in Zimbabwe a few years ago.

Given this career of such distinction it is not surprising that there have been numerous awards: five honorary doctorates, soon to be six; the prize for the International Trial Lawyer of the Year in 2001; the Sydney and Lady Kentridge Award in 2004; appointed by the Greek president as Commander of the Order

of Phoenix; the city of Athens medal of honour; the Bernard Simon Memorial Award, conferred on George at a ceremony in New Zealand a few years ago – an occasion made all the more moving when he met the 97-year-old widow of one of the seven New Zealand soldiers who had escaped with him in 1941.

Having lived in Johannesburg for over sixty years George has come to love the city and its people. But he retains an attachment to his Greek roots: having a love for modern Greek poetry; campaigning for the British Museum to return the Parthenon Marbles to Greece. Back in the 1970s he helped in the founding of a Greek school in Johannesburg – a school which now has a George Bizos scholarship fund.

What has sustained George Bizos, this supremely active, engaged person with such a wide range of involvements? No doubt his family – married to Arethe for 56 years – they have three sons and seven grandchildren. There is a passion, too, for vegetable gardening, and joy in the fact that his olive tree is finally bearing fruit.

Tonight it is the honour of Rhodes University to accord further recognition to George Bizos – a writer who has authored two books; a close friend and adviser to Nelson Mandela for 60 years – “a man who”, in Mandela’s own words, “combined a sympathetic nature with an incisive mind”; but most of all, a lawyer – who over four decades exposed the lies of the apartheid system, and in court tore apart state witnesses and demolished apartheid’s apologists; a lawyer dedicated to the fight for human rights; described as “a legendary name, renowned throughout the legal profession and beyond”, and as “a village boy destined to become one of the world’s great lawyers”.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on George Bizos the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.