

Stephen Bantu Biko (1946-1977)

On 18 December 1946, Mr and Mrs Mzimgayi Biko gave thanks for the birth of their third child and second son, Bantu Stephen. Steve's father died when he was four years old.

Steve began his schooling at Brownlee Primary for two years and continued at Charles Morgan Higher Primary for four years. He began his high school education at Forbes Grant Secondary School, then moved on to Lovedale Institute, Alice to prepare for his matriculation. He was at Lovedale for only three months when the school was closed down as a result of strikes by senior pupils. Steve then moved on to Marianhill, the Catholic church centre in Natal.

Steve enrolled at the University of Natal (Non-European Section) in 1966 to read for a degree in medicine. This was in the immediate post-Sharpeville era and Black student organizations like the African Students' Association (ASA) and the African Students' Union of South Africa (ASUSA) were crushed by the system. Thus many Black students drifted towards the multiracial (non-racial) National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and the University Christian Movement (UCM). The authorities at the "bush colleges" (segregated universities for Blacks), with the exception of the medical school at Wentworth (Steve's campus) refused their students permission to affiliate to NUSAS. In any event, white students at English-speaking campuses outnumbered Blacks in the ratio 9:1 in 1969, making NUSAS a lily-white organization. These white "radicals" took it upon themselves to champion the Black cause and together with the likes of Helen Suzman and Alan Paton, were seen by many Blacks (in the absence of any authentic Black organization) as important spokespersons for the Black cause. Thus a state of virtual white trusteeship came into being.

At the end of the day, however, NUSAS failed dismally to meet the genuine aspirations of its Black members. In 1967-68 a ferment was under way amongst these Black students. Prominent from the start were people like Steve, Vuyelwa Mashalaba, Aubrey Mokoape, Barney Pityana, Harry Nengwekhulu, Hendrick Musi, Petrus Machaka, Manana Kware, J. Goolam, Strini Moodley and Henry Isaacs. The July 1967 annual conference of NUSAS at Rhodes University in Grahamstown

was the occasion which set Steve and his colleagues along the BC path. The University Administration at Rhodes prohibited mixed accommodation and eating facilities during the conference. Black students began to question even more deeply the value of the superficial integration at which NUSAS was playing. Strong doubts were expressed about the sincerity and the integrity of white "radicals"-Rhodes University was one of the citadels of white liberalism, alongside other "open universities". There was dissatisfaction with the manner in which the NUSAS leadership had easily given in to the challenge at Rhodes, after the token motions of condemnation against the establishment. The politics of white trusteeship was exposed as sterile, bold at the verbal level but impotent to effect meaningful change. But even more important to the evolution of BC, the aptitude of whites to define black experiences and grievances and to articulate black aspirations was seriously questioned. It was pointed out that white radicals stood to gain more from slight modifications to the system than from its complete

dismantlement; while the Black people would never be satisfied with the arrangement of the same old furniture with the same decrepit apartheid structure.

At the July 1968 conference of NUSAS and UCM, which were both held within the vicinity of Johannesburg, Black delegates from the two bodies withdrew to caucus among themselves about what to do when the 72 hours during which they were permitted by law to remain in the exclusive white area expired. During the meeting other matters affecting their interests as Black people cropped up. Thus the South African Students Organization (SASO) was conceived.

A Blacks-only meeting was called for December at Biko's old high school in Marianhill and the name SASO was formally adopted. The conference resolved to break with NUSAS in order to create a situation where Blacks could spell out their problems as Black people and prescribe their own carefully thought out remedies. An inaugural conference was planned for July 1969 at the University of the North in Turfloop.



Ntsiki Biko and her two children, Samora aged two and Nkosinathi aged six, soon after hearing of Steve's death.

The conference at Turfloop decided to drop the term 'Non-White', which was used in all official government communications. They saw the term, in Fanonian terms, as a negation of their being. They were being described as 'non-something', which implied that the standard was something else and they were not that particular standard. To quote Steve: "They felt that a positive view of life, which is commensurate with the build-up of one's dignity and confidence, should be contained in a description which (they accepted), they sought to replace the term 'non-white' with the term 'Black' ". It was at this Inaugural Conference that Steve became SASO's first President.

At the July 1970 General Students Conference at Wentworth, multi-racialism or non-racialism in the context of South Africa, where Blacks were doomed to be junior partners, was found to be untenable. Biko declared in a policy statement shortly before the Wentworth conference:

"Blacks are tired of standing at the touchlines to witness a game that they should be playing. They want to do things for themselves and by themselves."

A resolution at this Conference affirmed that "the emancipation of Black people in this country depends entirely on the role Black people themselves are prepared to play." (Perhaps today we would delete "entirely" and substitute it with "primarily". But the fundamental thrust is the same.)

In December 1970 Steve married Nontsikelelo (Ntsiki) Mashalaba from Umtata. From 1971 his heart was increasingly in political activity and he experienced constant surveillance and harassment from the security police. In June 1972 Steve was expelled by the University of Natal (**Black Section**) (!) for his political activities.

It was in this year (1972) that Steve played a pivotal role in forming the Black People's Convention (BPC), an adult umbrella BC organization. BPC was formally launched in Pietermaritzburg in July 1972. The Black Community Programme (BCP) also came into being, to operate as a wing of professional experts. BCP was created to carry out specific tasks in community development in a spirit of self-reliance. Some of the projects undertaken were the erection of creches and clinics, the setting up of adult literacy and preventive medicine programmes, home industries and other economic projects centred in the impoverished rural areas, and the establishment of leadership and youth programmes — a project which proved to

mes — a project which proved to have far-reaching consequences in 1976.

Upon his expulsion from Wentworth, Steve assumed a role in BCP in Durban. Amongst BCP's projects was **Black Review**, an analysis of political trends.

On 1 March 1973, Steve and seven other SASO/BPC leaders were banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. Steve began studying law via the University of South Africa during this year.

Restriction to Ginsberg Location in King William's Town meant that Steve was not permitted to leave the confines of the town and that he was prohibited from talking to more than one person at a time. It also meant that Steve could not be quoted.

QUOTE:

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Steve founded the Eastern Cape branch of BCP and worked as branch executive until an extra clause was inserted in his banning order at the end of 1975 prohibiting him from being associated with BCP or entering its King William's Town offices at 15a Leopold Street.

In 1974 Steve was charged for breaking his banning order by receiving visitors at home, and charged in the alternative with attending an illegal gathering in terms of the ban. He was found not guilty and acquitted.

Steve founded the Zimele Trust Fund Foundation to help political prisoners and their families and the Ginsberg Educational Trust for the purpose of assisting black students. In September 1975 Steve was refused a passport to attend a conference to which he had been invited by the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission in Germany, and in December 1975 he was specifically prohibited from participating in BPC activity. He was again charged with breaking his banning order by entering an educational institution to write a law examination. This case was never concluded.

In 1976 Steve became the Secretary-General of the Zimele Trust Fund. In April 1976 he was charged once again with breaking his banning order. The Court discharged him.

Outside court, a security policeman gave Steve a summons for not stopping at a stop sign. Steve conducted his own defence and was acquitted.

In June 1976 Steve gave evidence for the defence at the SASO/BPC trial where 9 leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement were charged under the Terrorism Act. Steve was detained under section 6 of the Terrorism Act for 101 days from August to December 1976 at East London's Fort Glamorgan Prison's Maximum Security Section. He was released without being charged.

At the Congress of the BPC in January 1977 in Durban Steve was elected Honorary President of the BPC. Soweto leaders of the 1976 Uprising demanded that the government negotiate with the three black leaders of the liberation movements: Nelson Mandela of the ANC, Robert Sobukwe of the PAC and Steve Biko of the BPC.

In March 1977 Biko was charged with defeating the ends of justice and was detained again at Fort Glamorgan and acquitted later. In July 1977 he was accused of telling a number of black school children charged with setting fire to their school to renege on statements they had made to the police. What had really happened was that the school children had come to him for advice, saying that they had been beaten by security police and forced to sign confessions that they had not even been permitted to read. Steve advised them to tell this to the court. This they did, and were acquitted. (Of course, they were promptly detained under the Terrorism Act). Steve was acquitted yet again.

Finally August 19, 1977. Together with Peter Cyril Jones, Steve was stopped in a car at a roadblock and taken into custody in Port Elizabeth. He was detained under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act. He was kept naked and manacled and died in detention on 12 September 1977, leaving a widow and two small children, Nkosinathi aged 7 and Samora aged 3.

After Steve's death, the system dropped the gauntlet on the mainstream BC organizations such as SASO, BPC and BCP on October 19, 1977.

In April 1978 a writer remarked: "The fate of Peter Jones is not known. At the time of writing, he is still in detention." It is a sad commentary on the South African torture chamber that we have to echo these words in September 1984.