Chapter Nine

The Congress of Democrats: A Stalin Fetish

Although it was a perception by many Liberals that the Congress of Democrats (COD) was effectively the Communist Party in another guise, it was never seen by the ANC or the South African Indian Congress – or for that matter the fledgling SACP – as a "communist front". The irony is that the COD was intended to be a broad church of democratic opinion, initially a "loose forum", in support of human rights and the African and Indian congress' campaigns against discriminatory legislation. While it was true that a significant outcome of the Defiance Campaign was the establishment of the COD, it is highly likely that an organization – or at least a loose forum of democratic white opinion, would have been formed sooner or later if the civil disobedience campaign had not spawned it at that particular time. Sisulu had much to do with its establishment. There was an obvious need for an organization that would house the small but growing band of white democrats who supported the congresses. The SACP, formed about the same time as the Congress of Democrats, carried on the tradition of being the only multiracial organization in the country. But it was also a socialist movement based on Marxist principles. Many in the congress movement might have agreed with its Marxist philosophy, but "Congress" was a more eclectic and essentially nationalist organization, "a broad church", as we were fond of saying. In any case, the SACP was a clandestine body and any organizational identification with the ANC or SAIC would have led to the banning of these bodies under the Suppression of Communism Act. While many of the members of the newly formed SACP, like myself, were long-standing activists in the CPSA (and later the SACP), we joined COD as democrats to support the struggle against apartheid and not to promote Socialism.

There were a number of meetings that led to COD's formation, each one making it less likely that it would be as politically wide-ranging as initially conceived. The first was an exploratory meeting at the Darragh Hall, a long and narrow venue with an old church stone exterior, near the former Wanderers Sports Ground in Johannesburg. It was convened in November 1952 by the National Action Council (NAC) which had been formed by the African and Indian congresses together with the Franchise Action Council, to plan and co-ordinate the actions of the Defiance Campaign. Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Yusuf Cachalia represented the NAC at the meeting and Bram Fischer was in the chair. A selected number of people were invited, some of them well known liberals,

some, like myself, close to the congresses and formerly in the CPSA – and a contingent of left-wing supporters who had been members of the ex-servicemen's organization, the Springbok Legion – all of them white, not all of them communists. Oliver Tambo was the first to speak. His remarks were direct, rather formal and carefully crafted to avoid offence. He said the aim of the gathering was to establish a forum of liberal-minded individuals to encourage dialogue between progressive whites and the African and Indian congresses. The regime, he said, was indifferent to the impact of its harsh legislation on black South Africans and the distance that whites had generally placed between themselves and the defiance movement suggested that they too were unperturbed at the effect of this legislation on the black population. "The silence of European democrats to the challenge of the issues involved in the Defiance Campaign," he said, " is being construed by Non-Europeans as acquiescence in … the government's policies."

It was a forceful speech followed by the interventions of Sisulu and Cachalia They were an impressive trio, each as diverse in tone and physical appearance as anyone could imagine. Tambo was slightly built, a permanent crease on his forehead and creases on each side of his face, a confident speaker, precise and careful in his choice of words. Walter Sisulu was thoughtful, shorter but stockier than the other two. Yusuf Cachalia, was tall and relatively lean at that time, with glasses more darkly shaded than Sisulu's. He was a figure for all seasons. He could have been at a church gathering, a meeting of a board of company director's or at a funeral. None of them was more than in his early forties. They answered a few questions concerning the aims of the Defiance Campaign and its progress, and then left it to Bram Fischer to approach the subject of a democratic forum. This, Bram said, was to be based on a number of broad human rights principles for all South Africans, including the freedoms of speech, assembly, organization and economic opportunity, independent of race, colour or gender.[1] He spoke slowly and deliberately, weighing his words for the impact they might make and apparently careful to ensure it was a broad body of democratic opinion he was talking about and not anything more ideological. A provisional committee was elected to draw up a constitution based on these seemingly acceptable principles.[2]

The meetings that followed were less harmonious and the issues clearer. The question was whether social and economic freedoms were possible for all South Africans if some were excluded from the franchise. There were disagreements between the more conservative individuals and those already close to Congress over the form of the new organization and the nature of the franchise. Those close to Congress (mostly former members of the banned CPSA; many of them not yet recruited to the new Party, which was still in the process of formation) proposed a form of franchise that was unqualified, immediate and universal. Those against this formulation wanted a franchise that was limited by income and education. A more worthy reason for their objection, articulated in

Advance of 15 October 1953, was the proposal that the new organization "concentrate its efforts [in the matter of recruitment] among sections of the population not catered for by the congresses". This meant that the new body would recruit its membership exclusively from the ethnically white section of the population. They believed a body of democrats should by definition be non-racial in its membership.

Disappointed, they went on to organize the "non racial" Liberal Party. Regrettably, they never found a meeting point with the Congress of Democrats, the body that arose from the initial discussions, and were very wary of the communists within that organization. The subsequent adoption of a qualified franchise by the Liberal Party when it was finally formed, did little to attract black members to its side. The Liberal attitude to the franchise was summed up in an astute observation by Rusty Bernstein, who in his autobiography (2003), noted that it opened a lasting breach between the Liberal Party and the mainstream of black opposition in South Africa.[3] Their stance on the franchise, limited their party's reach into the black population and ironically rendered it an overwhelmingly white organization.

The COD as the new organization became known, was soon seen as a partner of the Congress movement. Its human rights' principles, formulated at the Darragh Hall meeting in November 1952, were approved at its founding conference in October 1953, in the midst of the most repressive legislation of the decade. Its founding conference was convened by the Springbok Legion; the Johannesburg group of the Congress of Democrats; and the Cape Town Democratic League. There were 88 delegates from the major city centres who attended the opening. Rusty Bernstein delivered the keynote speech and his main theme was equality and the repudiation of what he described as "the false doctrines of white supremacy, apartheid, trusteeship and segregation". It was an eloquent address, not in the least declamatory, stressing equality and rejecting outmoded ideas such as trusteeship, and (by implication) a qualified franchise for African voters. He concluded with a statement that was challenging at a time when it was unclear how long the government would tolerate opposition to the apartheid project: "Ideas such as ours which march in step with the great political currents of our time cannot be put in straight jackets or decreed out of existence."[4]

The initial executive committee, elected to steer the new organization, included Bram Fischer, Ruth First, Cecil Williams, Jack Hodgson (secretary), Helen Joseph (one of the few non-communists on the executive) and Piet Beyleveld (president). As former members of the CPSA almost of all of them, Helen Joseph and Piet Beyleveld excepted, were already named under the Suppression of Communism Act. When they were banned, their places were taken by younger members, some of them new recruits to the underground SACP, formed in the same year. Not all the members of COD were communists, especially for the two years of its existence after 1960.[5] I do not remember

signing an application for membership of the new organization, but simply accepted that I was a part of it, together with practically all the ex-CPSA members I knew. By the time of COD's founding, however, I had already been recruited to the revived underground Party (referred to as the SACP, to distinguish it from its predecessor) and found myself in a unit with Rusty Bernstein, Ruth First, Cecil Williams and Rica Hodgson, all of them initially members of the national executive committee of the COD. They were banned from holding office in the COD and from all its activities almost as soon as the founding conference ended in October 1953.

Little has been recorded on the history of the COD and equally little is known about its campaigns. The organization was probably no more than a symbol of "white" support for the liberation movement, its numbers were small and its influence tiny. But the contribution of the COD cannot be measured quantitatively. We saw ourselves (and I think the perception was mutual) as a part of the larger movement and not just a fraction of whites on the fringes of the freedom struggle. Our brief in the Congress of Democrats (outlined at the initial meeting at the Darragh Hall in 1952) was to expose to the white section of the community the evils of discrimination and colour bars; to mobilize support for the abolition of all discriminatory laws and practices and to stand for equal political rights and freedoms for all South Africans.[6] In doing so we did not exactly endear ourselves to the white community; for many these thoughts were rank heresies, ideas beyond their forbearance. While being applauded by blacks, we were readily derided by whites and were perceived by the Liberal Party as Stalinists.

It was an uphill battle and although personally shattering, we persevered. We defied unjust laws even before the organization was formally founded and sat together with other members of Congress in the Treason Trial and later at the Rivonia and Fischer trials. Over the ten years of COD's existence our members were active alongside the African, Indian and Coloured members of the national organizations and together with them we experienced the punitive treatment, detention, torture, long trials and harsh prison sentences that were meted out to opponents of the regime. While the new organization carried out educational work, held public meetings, produced publicity material and enrolled members throughout the country, it was not its initial intention to enter candidates for election to public office.[7] However, the diminishing space for political protest since Sam Kahn's expulsion in 1952 led COD to propose candidates at the national and local government levels, and for the movement as a whole to support progressive whites as natives representative candidates in the parliamentary elections.

Parliamentary Politics

Brian Bunting was the first of three Congress candidates to stand for parliament after Kahn. He took his seat in 1953 only to be expelled about nine months later. Ray

Alexander, a stalwart trade unionist was elected in 1954 but was debarred from taking office. At the end of that year, Len Lee Warden (a printer by profession) who was vice-chairman of COD, won the election and formally took his seat in January 1955 as a COD candidate. In all three cases the contests were lively. Bunting was officially ordered "not to become an MP", but the minister's prohibition was served too late for him to withdraw as he had already accepted nomination and paid the obligatory deposit. The anger that this incurred was extraordinary. Malan was so livid that he told his supporters (during the general election that year): "if Bunting is elected to Parliament it would be for such a short time that the seat he occupied would not even get warm".[8] As it happened, more votes were cast for Bunting than previously for Sam Kahn or Fred Carneson (for the Cape Provincial Council) and the total poll was higher than ever before. Bunting was elected with an overall majority of 3 183 votes and all his opponents lost their deposits. Support for him had been so solid that many voters (too late for the ballot) had stood in line outside the Kensington polling station, ready to mark their crosses on the ballot paper when the doors closed at 9 p.m. on election day.

Malan did all in his power to prevent Bunting from taking his seat in parliament. The Minister of Justice insisted obstinately that he should either have withdrawn his nomination (under the Suppression of Communism Act) or notified the returning officer that he was no longer qualified to stand for election. But there was no provision in the act for the withdrawal of a nomination and Bunting's lawyers told the court – "once he'd paid his deposit [the election officer] could not change his mind … the election process had to go on!" More light-heartedly, the court was told that Bunting had already been sent a Christmas card by the governor general and an invitation to lunch on the day parliament opened.[9] Much to our relief and the jubilation of his constituents, Brian was acquitted of the absurd charge of becoming an MP. Meanwhile, his constituents told him good-humouredly that they were very glad to have him as their representative in parliament, adding: "it doesn't matter if the government kicks you out … That will show [that] you are a true representative of the people, because the government is always kicking us about too."[10] The sense of triumph was short-lived, for almost immediately after this a ban under the Suppression of Communism Act prohibited Bunting from attending meetings for one year. But there was nothing in the act to prevent him from taking his seat in parliament or from addressing parliament on every substantive issue that came before it.

In a maiden speech that matched the challenging circumstances of his election, he told parliament:

> The manner of my election and the events of last year are an indication that the African people of this country and the non-European people generally are now challenging the whole system of rule in this country … The African people are

> today staking a claim for participation in the government, for the right to take part in the framing of decisions that affect them and the country, for the right to sit in the House, for the right to sit in the cabinet. Yes, even the right … to be prime minister.[11]

He felt sure that social change could come about in South Africa peacefully, without violence or racial friction and without bloodshed, but the policy being pursued by the present government "was making that desire impossible of fulfilment". Citing a recent statement by Chief Luthuli, he ended by appealing to white South Africans – before it was too late – "to accept us now!"

But Malan would not accept the benign advice of Chief Luthuli any more than he would tolerate the presence of Brian Bunting in parliament. The Public Safety Bill, with its harsh clauses on corporal punishment for civil obedience was in the last stages of its legislative journey through parliament. Bunting wasted no time in expressing his outrage at the tyrannical nature of this legislation. His speeches on the bill and a slew of discriminatory legislation enraged the National Party hierarchy as well as the parliamentary backbenchers who regularly shouted him down (in one instance with cries of "Mau Mau") after he had made a reference to the combative Kenyan resistance movement. "The government was guaranteeing a violent future in race relations in the country", he told parliament, "and the non-Euoropean people would not be denied political rights forever but would fight this dictatorship".[12] The Congresses outside parliament were making the same protests. Inside the House, Bunting raised the temperature of parliament by condemning the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Bill, under which legislation the minister had given himself absolute power to regulate wages and settle disputes. Strikes were all but prohibited and made punishable with severe penalties. The bill reflected the approach of successive governments to the status of Africans and their rights as workers. African trade unions were simply not recognized and despite the numerous wage commissions, few governments paid serious attention to work and wages. In the words of the current minister, African trade unions could "bleed to death".[13] Bunting's speech and the extra-parliamentary protests were ignored and the bill was passed into law.

The COD threw itself into the campaigns against the labour bills and all other discriminatory legislation, submitting an impressive memorandum of 78 pages to the United Nations in which it contrasted every article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the discriminatory practices in South Africa.[14] It was a report that left the world in little doubt of the fascist nature of the South African government: "The doctrines of apartheid, white supremacy, trusteeship and segregation like all other doctrines of racial discrimination", the memorandum read, "are inimical to the peace, happiness and

prosperity of South Africa … We proclaim our support for the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights". It was a worthy effort but we were titling at windmills – for the ruling party wasted no further time in proceeding with a number of other bills in the legislative cycle that year, including the notorious law to remove Africans from their homes in the Western Areas of Johannesburg and a bill on Bantu Education, which in its long-lasting consequences was probably the most enduringly disadvantageous to the African population that has ever been introduced into law. Together with Helen Joseph, I did what I could on behalf of COD to establish the Cultural Clubs created as a temporary alternative to Bantu education for the African children whose parents had followed the ANC's call to boycott government schools (see chapter 10: "Bantu Education or the Street").

The bill to remove Africans from the Western Areas of Johannesburg was part of the Minister of Native Affairs' attempt to define apartheid space, which Bunting was quick to point out was an escape from the reality of South African life and showed a serious state of denial on the part of government of the fact that South Africa was an overwhelmingly black country. Verwoerd, the Minister of Native Affairs at the time, was obsessive about "containing" the black population. Bunting's criticism of his vision of the future of South Africa was withering:

> Shut the Africans out from our life, hide them away, do not let anybody see them. The Minister hopes the Africans will become a people without homes, beasts of burden who will do the bidding of their masters without question and to whom obedience and submission becomes second nature.[15]

The only point of contact with Africans in the townships would then be via the officials of the Native Affairs Department and with the police. The National Party MPs bristled. As Sam Kahn later said in a tribute to Bunting, "he hastened his own expulsion by scarifying the nationalists for their … callous treatment of the African peoples in a series of … speeches, fired with indignation." There was no doubt that Bunting would soon be expelled, but he would go down fighting, confronting the government on every piece of discriminatory legislation embodying callous laws that never seemed to be in short supply. After years of writing editorials in *Advance* and its predecessors he had literally found his voice in parliament, rising at every occasion to express his repugnance and revulsion at the depth of the regime's depravity.

Ultimately, time ran out. Nine months after his election, in July 1953, he was expelled. A parliamentary Select Committee appointed to inquire into his "record" concluded by 19 votes to 2 that he had "advocated, defended and encouraged the achievements of the objectives of communism both before and after the promulgation of the [Suppression of Communism] Act."[16] The report, recorded over nineteen hours of

cross-examination of Bunting, contained 222 pages of evidence, an archival repository of bigoted thinking. Only Alex Hepple (leader of the Labour Party in parliament) and the natives representatives voted against the adoption of the committee's report when it was submitted to parliament.

Bunting responded with a brave speech against the farcical procedure of expulsions from parliament; the unacceptable grounds of his removal; and the recent bannings against trade unionists and congress activists who were also ordered to resign from their organizations and (preferably) be neither seen nor heard of again. He finally told the committee: "… when a long train of abuses and usurpations reduce the people to a despotism, it is their right to throw off such government and provide new guards for their own security".[17] There would be another time, an opportune moment, when the African people would come into their own as heirs of the future. His reference to the American Declaration of Independence seemed enigmatic and abstract, and no one listened. In paying tribute to Brian Bunting, Sam Kahn applauded Brian's tenacity as an MP and looked beyond the apartheid parliament to the future, when Bunting's talents would be properly appreciated. Brian Bunting can have good cause to be proud of his record in parliament", he wrote in the movement's newspaper, "and prouder too of the unique position he occupied in the hearts of his constituents. He has been lost to parliament for the while, but not to the cause of the liberation and emancipation of the South African people".[18] When Bunting took his seat in parliament 41 years later in the jubilant circumstances of Mandela's election victory, he must have recalled those prescient words.

The vacancy created by Brian's expulsion did not prevent the Congress leadership from endorsing the nomination of Ray Alexander, party member, trade unionist and named communist, in his place. In the decision to contest the election the ANC leadership shoved aside lingering thoughts of boycott (still prevalent among the youth and within the ANC) and urged that every opportunity should be taken to elect a person who would fight for the right of Africans to sit in parliament, arguing that "there is nothing the government would like more than for the people to refuse to vote!"[19] Raymond Mhlaba, at the time a trade unionist, later a member of the Umkhonto we Sizwe High Command, "appealed … to the African people of the Western Cape to use the meagre rights at their disposal to elect Ray Alexander", saying that in his view she was the "true representative of the people."[20] By contrast to this, news of Ray's nomination was received with hysteria in the National Party-aligned press, their columnist "Dawie", frantically wailing: "it is now too late to prevent her from participating in the election and I think I can just as well say that it's too late to prevent her from winning the election."[21] He was correct but despite his confidence we knew that the government would try to keep her out of parliament just as they had with Brian and Sam.

Unsurprisingly the Minister of Justice (Swart) quickly announced that he intended to amend the Suppression Act to prevent her from taking her seat. Despite this, her campaign continued as upbeat as ever. She was indefatigable. The skies would fall in if she missed an opportunity to attack the regime in the limited space the election allowed her. “I have only one aim in this election”, she wrote in her manifesto, “and that is to carry on the fight … for justice, freedom and equality”. Her seat in parliament would be held by an African if she had her way, she said, pledging herself to fight against exploitation, race oppression and the suspension of trade unionists. Her programme was endorsed by leaders of the ANC, the Indian Congress and prominent members of the trade union movement.[22] It was a winning ticket and so was her election slogan “Vote for Alexander, Vote for Afrika!” The elation was immense on the news that she had won the election with a total of 3 525 votes, double the number of each of her two opponents.[23] As the elections were held under the most difficult of circumstances and some of the population had shifted back to the rural areas, the overall poll was smaller than Sam’s or Brian’s, but the result was welcome enough. Predictably, she was forcibly prevented from entering the House of Assembly by the formidable presence of police detectives who were strategically posted at all entrances to parliament.[24] Her election was nonetheless a defeat for the regime and her flagrant exclusion from parliament noted with anger by her disenfranchised constituents.

Brian’s and then Ray’s banning from parliament was part of the regime’s offensive against the communist and non-communist cadres of the movement. Between 1951 and 1953 the core of the Communist leadership was banned and with them some of the most prominent activists in the movement who did not join the SACP. All were ordered to relinquish their official positions and to resign from their organizations. The restrictions were designed to destabilize the Congress leadership and the trade union movement without actually shutting the organizations down. All the veteran white trade unionists were banned including long-standing trade unionists Julia Wolfson, Willie Kalk, Piet Huyser, Nancy Dick and Ray Alexander. I had known most of them for years. After removing the effective trade union leadership, the regime made a concerted effort to cripple the national movements by the same tactics of exclusion. One after another, leading officials fell under the axe. A long list of African trade unionists received banning orders, including many in the Transvaal and Eastern Cape. The assaults that had begun in 1952 on the leaders of the national organizations with the banning of Kotane and Dadoo, were followed in 1953, less than a year later, by the banning of Yusuf Cachalia (joint secretary of the SAIC) and other stalwarts. They were proscribed from attending gatherings and ordered to resign their official positions.

Nelson Mandela, at the time president of the ANC in the Transvaal, who headed the volunteers in the Defiance Campaign, was banned under an esoteric clause (clause 11) of

the Suppression of Communism Act which empowered the minister to remove any person from office who had been convicted of statutory communism i.e. contravening the terms of the Suppression of Communism Act, but not necessarily being named as a member of the Communist Party. As Mandela had been convicted under this act in a trial with Moroka and other Defiance Campaign leaders in 1953, he was technically a statutory communist and now the first unlisted person to be banned under the "Suppression Act". He was also silenced under the catch-all clauses of the Riotous Assemblies Act, which effectively enabled the minister to ban him under any circumstances and to order him to resign from his official positions in the ANC.

Initially the government targeted the national leadership of the Congress movement, hoping to strike at its executive heart, but it also had no compunction in applying its strategy of exclusion to local leaders in the provinces if it thought their activities a thorn in their side. Gladstone Tshume and A.P. Mda, a trade unionist and an intellectual respectively, were first among those banned in the Eastern Cape along with John Motsabi, Andrew Kunene and George Maeka, popular trade union activists in the Transvaal. The traded unionists were given 30 days to relinquish their positions and resign from their unions and from the ANC. In the Western Cape, John Gomas a veteran communist who had been a trade unionist since the 1930s and was a leader in the Coloured Franchise Action Council, was similarly silenced and ordered to quit his organization. It was more like a putsch against communists and non-communists alike, a targeted gagging of the most vocal activists in the movement. In a short time the regime rancorously banned a number of long-standing activists in the Congress of Democrats, Cecil Williams, Hilda Watts, Bram Fischer and Jack Hodgson (the general secretary), all of them well known communists, but also prominent in either the theatre, the legal profession, local government or the former Springbok Legion.

By December 1955, most of COD's experienced leadership was prohibited from participating in the organization or from working in any of the structures connected with the Congress movement. Cecil Williams, whom I knew quite well by this time from the SACP cell we shared, was the national vice-chairman of COD and national chairman of the Springbok Legion. The two organizations were small and their impact on the country greater in the minds of government ministers than in reality, but their identification with the cause of African liberation was enough to make them targets of repression. In the racist thinking of the government the white leaders were the instigators of black protest and the authorities would have been pleased to see their organizations "bleed to death", a phrase they used that was not necessarily confined to the African trade union movement. Cecil was formerly a school teacher and at the time was an actor and theatre director. In 1962 he was caught in a roadblock with a bearded Nelson Mandela who had returned from a much publicised tour abroad and was on the run for leaving the country without a

passport, the least of the charges that would be laid against him. Williams was tall and urbane with a voice like an English gentleman. He was always immaculately dressed in a signature three-piece suit, usually grey, pointed shiny black shoes and an elegant Stetson on his head. If accosted by the police, he would say that Mandela was his chauffeur, but bizarrely it was he who was driving the car when they were stopped in the roadblock!

The banning orders prompted novel ways of communicating with each other and with the public. On one occasion we held a meeting in which the voices of Bram Fischer, Hilda Watts, Dan Tloome, Nelson Mandela and Michael Harmel were heard on a tape recorder at a meeting held at the Darragh Hall in Johannesburg. Beyleveld, the national chairman (later a state witness in several court appearances, my own trial included) opened the meeting with only himself and Rusty Bernstein on the platform. To the dismay of a surprisingly large audience, he called upon his banned absentee speakers to address the gathering. The earnest message from Mandela was quite heartening: “For my own part,” he said, “these restrictions have not in any way deterred or frightened me. On the contrary, they have made me even more determined”. Harmel’s sombre voice followed but was interrupted by two detectives who came up to the platform and before the others could have their say, confiscated the “wire recorder”, as it was then called.[25]

Mandela’s reaction to his restrictions was to ignore them as long as it was prudent to do so. Similarly, the former CPSA members and officials or activists in the Congress and the trade union movements did not allow their banning orders to prevent them from meeting to plan, organize or discuss policy. The style of work was different, covert and fraught with anxiety. There was always the fear of being observed by the security police and the danger was ever-present of being apprehended for illegally attending meetings. Not only had those who were banned and restricted attended these clandestine meetings, but also those of us who had so far avoided being banned under the Suppression of Communism Act. The new style of work required punctuality, safe houses, dedicated fellow travellers, committed cadres and nerves of steel. It also required discrete individuals who were cautious enough not to be followed and not to disclose where we went or with whom we met and what was discussed. In some cases the leading individuals (fast learning the art of working covertly) would spend an entire day at meetings. In many respects these meetings helped to connect us, so that in time we became part of “the family”, a phrase we mostly reserved for the SACP to define our common connection. However, our mutual dependency and need for trusting relationships across the different components of the movement, whether communist or non communist, made these differences academic and rendered us all part of an extended family.

If we were previously “blinded by the illusion of bourgeois legality”, we had come a long way since that time. Combining legal and illegal work involved rigorous rules, including learning to cope with the unexpected and knowing when to act and when not to.

Many of us were in prison cells before these skills were perfected. I had known many of the comrades who became political prisoners in the 1960s before I was arrested, some from the CPSA before its banning, and later from COD or from the SACP. Often those of us who were not yet banned attended the same meetings of the Peace Movement, the Friends of the Soviet Union (FSU), COD, the Discussion Club[26] and the Congress. We also relaxed together from time to time, vague on the ambiguities of what in the legal gobbledegook of the Suppression of Communism Act constituted a social gathering, which according to the arcane terms of the act was punishable. In retrospect, it seems incredible that a plain house party would present such complexities. Communists, whether real or "statutory" were not expected to have fun!

The International Dimension

We were inspired by the struggles of others and encouraged that we were not alone in the fight for human rights and Socialism. It was also important to know that we were not unique in the treatment we received from the state. In the US McCarthyism was in full stride. Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had received the death sentence on a charge of atomic spying which we believed to be false. Pleas for a reprieve of their sentences were refused in the US and a petition to the US Consulate in Cape Town was ignored. These items of international interest were squeezed in-between the news of the Defiance Campaign and the serial bannings of communists locally.[27]

The fortitude of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg had touched us quite deeply when they were executed in June 1953. Long after the event, when I was released from prison in 1969, I re-read their *"Death House Letters* (1953) and was moved by one of the letters from Julius to Ethel, written a short time before his execution. In it he described a visit to the prison from his sons, Michael aged nine and Robert aged five. Julius wrote:

> When I was in the solitude of my cell once more and the door clanged shut behind me, I must confess I broke down and cried like a baby because of the children's deep hurt. With my back to the bars, I stood facing the concrete walls that boxed me in on all sides and I let the pains that tore at my insides flood out in tears. The wretched … inhumanity of it all.[28]

The two boys had played games in the death cell section while waiting for their parents to join them. They knew that their parents faced execution and that they were perhaps visiting them for the last time.[29] About a year earlier, Julius sent a chilling letter to Ethel (held in another section of the prison) regarding a previous visit of the two boys:

> Most of the hour was spent in discussion … It started with the death sentence … I told [Michael] we were not concerned about [the death sentence]; we were

> innocent … it was not his job to worry about that but to grow up and be well … He asked many questions … and [then] the boy said, 'Daddy, maybe I'll study to be a lawyer and help you in your case,' and I said, 'we won't wait that long as we want to be with you when you're growing up'.[30]

More than once, on the rare occasions that children under sixteen were allowed to visit their parents in jail in South Africa, they were surprised by the inner strength of their offspring. Quite often the parents still tried to direct their children's lives from jail and often made light of the long sentences ahead of them, unaware that the family's lifestyle had changed beyond recognition since their incarceration and that the children knew the truth. They had learned to cope on their own. Sadly, in this instance of the Rosenberg's, it was the death sentence that the parents faced and not a stretch in jail.

We followed every detail of their trial in the early 1950s and on one of the anniversaries of their execution, I wrote a radio play based on the *Death House Letters*. The play was written for the Discussion Club, a Johannesburg non-racial bipartisan forum, organized independently but not exclusively by COD members and was run with incredible commitment and some fanaticism by my brother Leon, the club's secretary. Many of its participants were students who identified with the struggle long after the club's demise, sometime around 1960. The radio play was a modest success. Michael Piccardy and Pela Kruger, two students who later became professional actors, played the parts of Julius and Ethel. They dutifully followed my directions during the play's production, succumbing to the irritating idiosyncrasies of an old tape recorder and patiently re-recording their lines which would fade in and out at the oddest times. They were both about twenty years of age at the time and I was not yet twenty-four. It was the first and only radio play I have ever written, least of all directed. Unfortunately, the script and the tape were confiscated during one of the raids by the security police and were obviously not considered to be of "enduring value" a term now used to assist officials in the Intelligence structures to decide whether or not to store, declassify or destroy information. The script must have been destroyed and is now quite forgotten. I recalled it, though, when I met (Michael) the older of Ethel and Julius's two sons while writing this autobiography. Both Michael and Robert took the surname of their adoptive parents (Meerapol) and as adults became active in civil rights struggles. Michael was about sixty when I met him, a confident and congenial man. He is an economist by profession and a professor at a university in the United States. His daughter Ivy is a film maker and had recently made an informative documentary film about her grandparents and the circumstances of their depressing trial. Meeting Michael Meerapol made me wonder about the generation of children in South Africa whose parents committed their lives to

the movement and either died in jail or exile or who, like Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, were victims of judicial murder. What scars did these children carry?

The death penalty was abolished in South Africa only in 1994. But in 1964, a trade unionist, Vuyisile Mini and two others were hanged for ordering the killing of a police informer. In the same year John Harris, a member of the African Resistance Movement was hanged for exploding a bomb in the main concourse of the Johannesburg railway station. The African Resistance Movement (ARM) was an off-shoot of the seemingly placid Liberal Party, many of whose members I met in prison in the mid-1960s. They were intrepid individuals whose understated contribution to the struggle quietly commanded the respect of all the communists who served time with them. John Harris and Vuyisile Mini (who was a member of the ANC and MK) were early victims of the gallows. I had met Vuyisile, who was a mild man, a popular musician whose political songs are still sung in the Eastern Cape. His daughter Mary, who had a strong streak of her father's courage, was an MK cadre and was killed in action in Luanda in 1979.

Between 1960 and 1990 an unknown number of activists died, some of them murdered by the security police, many killed during the armed struggle and others sentenced to death by hanging. A number of these atrocities have been recorded, but few so movingly as in Harold Strachan's searing account of the last hours of a comrade's life before he was hanged in the Pretoria Central Prison. Another is Hugh Lewin's disturbing description of how in the mid-1960s we waited in line, in grim silence, on the way to the prison workshops while the broken bodies of the common law victims of hanging were removed by the prison undertakers.[31] There were at least 100 prisoners in death row at any one time in 1966 during the eight months I spent at the Pretoria Central Prison. The numbers were written in chalk on the prison notice board. The practice of hanging is now forbidden under the 1996 Constitution but the lust among many South Africans for the re-introduction of capital punishment is still there.

A Stalin Fetish

Stalin's death occurred in the same year as the Rosenberg's execution but we were not inclined to reflect on the human sacrifices that occurred during the 30 years of his rule. Moses Kotane probably expressed the feelings of politically conscious Africans when he wrote:

> We who belonged to the oppressed, exploited and despised non-European races feel the loss more than any other people because it was in his policy of racial equality that we found inspiration. Those who traffic in human lives – the warmongers, profiteers and apostles of racialism – dreaded his name. They feared him because he was an indefatigable worker for world peace, and the architect of

> the freedom of the common man and the abolition of exploitation of man by man.[32]

It took nearly 50 years before we could properly accept the hard realities of the system under Stalin, probably for the same reasons that Kotane identified in his statement.

We were not of a mind to read the signs that should have alerted us to the unacceptable underside of Stalin's rule before Kruschev's revelations at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party; and in any case we were anxious to avoid identification with those who had quickly climbed onto the anti-Soviet bandwagon. So we remained quiet and uncritical. In 1953, when Stalin died, there were no overt signs of (official) "dissatisfaction" with his statesmanship and the tributes paid to him were accordingly uncritical. Joe Slovo, Hilda Watts and Dan Tloome for instance, added their voices to Kotane's, but they were all of a similar theme. Slovo reminded us that:

> Stalin combined the best attributes of the scholar, the worker and the simple soldier. He had been the chief architect of the state previously considered a utopia and the most important factor in the defeat of world fascism … Stalin survives wherever there are people striving for the advancement of mankind.[33]

Dan Tloome saw Stalin as "the emblem of liberation" and Hilda Watts, careful not to exacerbate the Cold War hysteria, and speaking in the temperate language of the Peace Movement, noted cautiously: "Stalin had made it clear that the peaceful coexistence of capitalism and socialism was fully possible given the mutual desire to co-operate … The Stalin state was busy creating not destroying."[34] The tributes were formal and also informal. The latter were more personal but no different from the others in their sentiments.

My personal tribute took the form of a Stalin retrospect, an exhibition of posters of the dead leader that took up every inch of the four walls of my bedroom. As far as I can remember, the exhibits highlighted my innocent, though mindless perception of Stalin's humanity, as he peered amiably at a group of little children behind the narrow podium from which he spoke. They gazed at him as on an icon of history, a symbol of light, reflecting the past, the present and the (socialist) future. Next, a poster of the man as a beloved leader receiving flowers from a young woman with braided hair, one of "the brides of Stalin"; another in his study in the Kremlin, dressed in mufti, sitting cross-legged smoking a pipe, its curved stem hugging a jet-black moustache. Next to that poster, a picture of him as a young Bolshevik in Lenin's team. By contrast, the posters on the opposite wall portrayed him as a soldier heavily decorated, bearing the title "Field-Marshal in The Great Patriotic War"; another showed him in the image of a soldier-statesman in front of a dozen or so generals. Finally in a change of style, Stalin at a

concert of the Red Army Choir and another poster depicting him in a cadet-style topcoat, bending forward to sign documents neatly arranged on his wide wooden desk. The entire display was a shrine to the man and a reflection of the veneration with which I held him as leader of the first socialist state.

It was during the Treason Trial in 1956 (three years after Stalin's death) that I first read a version of the text of Kruschev's speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR. The text (which was not confirmed as genuine) was purported to have been smuggled out of the Soviet Union and leaked to Nelson Rockefeller in the United States, where it was copied and widely disseminated.

The document was passed around for all of us who were in the SACP to read. Unfortunately, the "allegations" seemed serious but leaders were fallible, we were told. Stalin had made "grave errors"; he had succumbed to flattery – a pitfall that leaders should at all times try to avoid. He had made wrong judgments, but he was still the strong leader, the wise statesman, an outstanding war hero and Marxist theorist. Nevertheless, he was no longer the "fount of all wisdom"; to suggest otherwise was to fall into the line of thinking that gave rise to the "cult of the personality" – which all communists should avoid. Men did not make history, they simply responded to the material conditions around them. We were not going to join the world's Bolshevik-baiters and fail to see the wood for the trees. Every oppressed person knew that the USSR was the "emblem of liberation", the singular hope of mankind for a socialist future. The reality at that time was that the movement in South Africa was under attack and its very existence challenged while its leaders were being tried for treason. In the context of these developments the "allegations" against Stalin were given scant priority and we accepted Krushchev's revelations and carried on as usual!

Tradition, habit and political culture contributed to the "Stalinist" perception of the COD among liberals and frustrated our efforts to make it clear to them that ours was a non-sectarian, broad-based movement of democrats. They were clearly not convinced but that is exactly what we tried to be, despite the fact that at the time we were pariahs among whites; beyond the pale among liberals who should have been comrades; and pioneers of a non-racial South Africa in the eyes of our liberation partners.

Chapter 9

1 *Advance*, 27.11.1952.

2 On the tensions and the Darragh Hall meeting see Bernstein, *Memory against Forgetting*, pp. 136–139. Bernstein was privy to the prior discussions on the establishment of the new body of "white" democrats.

3 Bernstein, *Memory against Forgetting*, p. 138.

4 *Advance*, 15.10.1953.

5 It was banned in September 1962, almost ten years after its formation.

6 *Advance*, 27.11.1952; Exploratory meeting, Darragh Hall, Johannesburg, November 1952.

7 *Advance*, 27.11.52.

8 *Advance*, 20.11.1952.

9 *Advance*, 25.12.1952.

10 *Advance*, 27.11.1952.

11 *Advance*, 5.02.1953.

12 *Advance*, 26.08.1953.

13 *Advance*, 13.08.1953.

14 *Advance*, 20.08.1953.

15 *Advance*, 24.09.1953.

16 *Advance*, 17.09.1955. The two MPs who voted against the findings were V.M.L. (Margaret) Ballinger and Leo Lovell. The United Party opposition voted with the government.

17 *Advance*, 17.09.1953.

18 *Advance*, 15.10.1953.

19 *Advance*, 28.01.1954.

20 Raymond Mhlaba's personal memoirs, *Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda*, narrated to Thembeka Mufamadi (HSRC and Robben Island Museum, Cape Town, 2001), p. 99. (The appeal was made in a letter to *Advance* 25.03.1954.)

21 Cited from *Die Burger* by *Advance*, 28.01.1954.

22 The Manifesto was supported by M.B. Yengwa (secretary, Natal Provincial ANC); J.B. Marks; Yusuf Dadoo (president SAIC); G. Maeka (chairman of the Council of Non-European Trade Unions); and Stephen Dlamini (chairman of the Textile Workers' Union in Natal). Women and students also supported the Manifesto.

23 *Advance*, 29.04.1954. The two opponents were J.T.R. Gibson (998 votes) and Jonker (656 votes).

24 *Advance*, 24.04.1954.

25 *Advance*, 17.09.1953. (I did not trace the tape, but it is still conceivably among the myriad of security police documents in the National Archives, Pretoria.)

26 A Johannesburg non-racial bipartisan forum which ran for almost the whole decade of the 1950s organized largely by COD members and run by its secretary Leon Levy among his other duties as a trade unionist. Many of its participants who were probably more than a hundred, were youth and students who identified with the struggle long after the club's demise sometime around 1960.

27 *Advance*, 10.09.1953.

28 Cited in *Advance*, 19.02.1953.

29 *Advance*, 8.01.1953.

30 Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, *Death House Letters* (Jero Publishing, New York, 1953), pp. 62, 63.

31 Harold Strachan, *Maak a Skyf, Man!* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2004); Hugh Lewin, *Bandiet: Seven Years in a South African Prison* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1981).

32 *Advance*, 12.03.1953.

33 *Advance*, 12.03.1953.

34 *Advance*, 12.03.1953.