

## HONORARY GRADUATE

### GEORGE BIZOS

George Bizos was born in Greece. As a boy, he fled Greece during the Nazi occupation with his father and came to South Africa as a refugee.

Bizos completed his schooling in Johannesburg and came to Wits in 1949, completing his law degree in 1954. Already driven by a keen sense of justice, he was active in student politics and served on the SRC. At Wits he started a "lifelong friendship" with Nelson Mandela, for whom he was later to appear as counsel on several occasions.

After graduating Bizos joined the Johannesburg Bar. Like every young advocate Bizos practised both criminal and commercial law. His keen sense of justice, courage, and compassion ensured that he was instructed in political trials. He willingly accepted these briefs in a hostile political climate when advocates who appeared for opponents of the National Party government were labelled by the government, general public and attorneys as enemies of the state. He became a specialist in the political trial and appeared in most of the political 'causes célèbres' from the late 1950s to the end of the apartheid era. He was awarded silk in the 1980s.

A number of advocates at the Johannesburg Bar developed a reputation as 'human rights lawyers', but there can be little doubt that Bizos was the doyen of these lawyers. He appeared not only in trials under the security laws, but in cases covering the whole spectrum of apartheid legislation — group areas, population removals, pass laws. For any person charged with a political offence, Bizos was the first choice as advocate. There were a number of reasons for this: wide experience, a clear understanding of the judicial process in political trials, a sharp intellect, courage, compassion and an empathy with the accused person that few could match.

His track record is a long and distinguished one. Since the mid 1950s he has acted as counsel to Nelson Mandela and was part of the team that defended him, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki and others in the Rivonia Trial, 1963 - 1964. He has also acted as counsel in numerous other political cases including the Biko, Timol and Aggett inquests, the first Terrorism Trial, in which the internal leadership of SWAPO was tried, 1967 - 1969, and the Braam Fischer trial. In addition, he was counsel for Winnie Mandela in her numerous trials between the mid 1950s and 1992; he defended Albertina Sisulu, Barbara Hogan and other women, particularly those defying the carrying of passes from the mid 1950s onwards; and he was counsel to UDF leaders, including Patrick Lekota and Popo Molefe, in the Delmas Trial, 1985 - 1989.

Between 1985 and 1993 he was a judge on Botswana's Court of Appeal and from 1990 to 1994 he was a member of the ANC's Legal and Constitutional Committee, being Advisor to the negotiating teams at Codesa and to the drawing up of the Interim Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Bizos was a founder member of the National Council for Human Rights in 1979 and served on its national executive for many years.

Following the fall of apartheid Bizos declined to accept judicial office. Instead, he was appointed by President Mandela to the Judicial Services Commission responsible for the recommendation and the appointment of judges. He was leader of the team for the Constituent

Assembly before the Constitutional Court to certify the Constitution; leader of the team for the South African government to argue that the death penalty was unconstitutional; and leader of the team, on behalf of the Biko, Hani, Goniwe, Mkonto and Mhlaulu families, to oppose applications for amnesty.

In addition, he has been a Visiting Fellow at Columbia University, N.Y., Honorary President of Hands Off Cain, and recipient of a number of awards for the promotion of human rights in South Africa. In 1996 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws degree by the University of Natal.

Bizos is proud of his Greek roots and has taken an active part in the activities of the Greek community in South Africa. He was instrumental in establishing the Saheti School in Johannesburg and has played a leading role in its governance. In the transition years he frequently acted as spokesperson of the Greek community. He was appointed Honorary member of the Athens Bar in 1994 and made Commander of the Order of the Phoenix by the President of Greece for his contribution to Hellenism and the teaching of Greek.

George Bizos has maintained close ties with his alma mater. From 1978 to 1990 he was a member of the Board of Control of the Centre for Applied Legal Studies. His wisdom and experience helped to shape the direction of this institution.

The University takes great pride and pleasure in honouring George Bizos for his contribution to the preservation of justice during the apartheid years and to its advancement since 1990, by conferring on him its highest honour, the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.