

LP/009/0071/5

## LIONEL FORMAN'S PAPERS

Lionel Forman was born on Christmas Day 1927 in Johannesburg. As a young boy he developed a heart condition as a result of rheumatic fever. A lively child, he was unable to be as quiet as the condition demanded. However he had a love of reading and although he was often absent from school he won a national essay competition at the age of 15 on 'Improving the condition of the African people of South Africa'

Sarah, his mother was born in Bethnal Green in London and met his father, David Forman, and immigrant from Lithuania on the boat sailing to South Africa. David had left his homeland because of the severe discrimination against Jews and in South Africa he was sympathetic to the cause of African liberation from the start. His mother was an intelligent woman with a wide world view, so they encouraged their son's educational endeavours. Early on he became avidly interested in the works of Marx, Lenin and their critics.

When Lionel was 17 he escaped the protectiveness of his parents and registered at the University of Cape Town where he obtained a Masters Degree in Social Science in 1948. The four years he spent at the University were crowded with political activity. He was the youngest member of the Communist Party and spent his days in the Students Socialist Party agitating against colour bar activities in the university, fighting train apartheid, making speeches on the Grand Parade and helping trade unionists to organise their workers. When NUSAS held an end-of-conference ball attended by Prime Minister Smuts attendance was restricted to white students. Forman and the Socialist students quickly mobilised their supporters and advertised a counter celebration inviting everyone and boycotting the official function. Their party was highly successful and well reported in the press and Forman was castigated by NUSAS whom he threatened to sue.

He returned to Johannesburg on completing his degree and registered for a Law Degree at Wits. He was elected editor of the "Wits Student" the University weekly newspaper, and converted it from a dull faculty sheet to an active, imaginative and popular paper with contributions from the arts, personalities and politics on the campus and outside it. At the time NUSAS was a member of the International Union of Students set up after the war to bring the students of the world into cooperation with each other. However the Yugoslav students were expelled from the IUS on the orders of Stalin at the time and NUSAS wanted to withdraw.

Forman had by 1951, been the first student to be denied a passport, but was then granted one for a year on health grounds to visit London. He took no notice of the restrictions placed on him and attended a conference of the IUS at which he suggested that a Unity Meeting be called to discuss the Yugoslav expulsion and called on NUSAS to hold fire. At the conference he was elected to the Executive of the IUS for a two-year period as a representative of NUSAS based in Prague Czechoslovakia. The Unity Meeting was not able to keep the western student unions in the IUS and they set up a separate student body.

Lionel had met Sadie Kreel on his return to Johannesburg from Cape Town and, after a time, they had agreed to marry. When he arrived in Prague he arranged for her to join him. They were married in Prague in 1952 and their first son was born there. At the end of 1953 the Formans returned to South Africa where Lionel had been asked to edit the left-wing newspaper *Advance* which was later banned and changed its name to *New Age*.



Working on *Advance* was stimulating and important for Forman. His political ideas were forming. He began to write about the need to understand race and racism, and particularly the 'National Question'. In 1954 The Forum Club organised a debate in which T. Ngwenya (ANC), K. Jordaan (Unity Movement), Jack Simons (UCT) and Forman (CP) participated. There was a sharp and continuing discussion but soon after the CP decided the National Question was a 'hot potato' and blocked further debate.

In 1956 Forman was one of the 156 arrested in the Treason Trial. He was given the task of reporting on the proceedings which he wrote up every week in *New Age*. The articles were informative and often amusing. Solly Sachs exiled in London suggested that Forman collaborate with him and write a book on the Trial. "The South African Treason Trial" appeared in the book shops in England in 1957 while the Trial was still on.

Researching the Trial, Forman became engrossed in the early history of South Africa and realised that to understand the present we had to know the past. He started writing regular articles in *New Age* on the political history of South Africa, much of which started in the Eastern Cape, in Kingwilliamstown, Cradock, Lovedale, Alice and so on. His first booklet, *Chapters in the March to Freedom* was sold out in a few months and reprinted. At the same time he was practising as an Advocate, and defending trade unionists and political activists. He had written his final Law exams on return from Prague.

Forman's writing output from 1954 to 1959 was prodigious. He wrote quickly and plainly and despite his defective heart and the pain that often went with it, his mind was clear. History and the National Question were his main focus, but he also did a regular column for the newspaper on international situations under the title of 'Commentator' and of course he also worked in chambers, appearing in court in defence of political accused.

The 1950's was a period of intense legislation and resistance, of farm labour scandals, potato and bus boycotts, of forced removals; the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign, the Congress of the People, at which the Freedom Charter entered South African history, and it was the decade when 20,000 women marched to Pretoria in their fight against the pass on August 9 1956. That year culminated at dawn on 5 December with the arrests on a charge of 'High Treason' of the 156 activists.

By then Lionel had accumulated a vast quantity of historical material – early newspapers like the *Christian Express*, *Imvo Zabantsundu* and *Abantu Batho*. A.W.G. Champion asked him to rescue his papers of the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union) from a shed in Phoenix. Those papers are now at the Jagger Library in UCT.

In 1959 with still a welter of work in front of him, Forman agreed to allow Chris Barnard to perform a heart-lung by-pass operation on him. That was on October 19. The operation failed and Lionel Forman died at the age of 31. Sadie Forman has given his papers to the University of Fort Hare Library. With Andre Odendaal she edited a selection of his writings entitled 'A Trumpet from the Housetops'.

The tributes poured in. His comrades in the trade unions wrote a song for him: Lionel Forman yindode encinane enkundleni mkhulu njenge ntabas yetafile, Mhla sashywa ngu Forman, Walile Umzi akwatyiwa mhla sahuzwa ngu Forman.....(Forman is a small man, but in court he is as big as Table Mountain)



## LIONEL FORMAN'S PAPERS

Lionel Forman was born on Christmas Day 1927 in Johannesburg. As a young boy he developed a heart condition as a result of rheumatic fever. A lively child, he was unable to be as quiet as the condition demanded. However he had a love of reading and although he was often absent from school he won a national essay competition at the age of 15 on 'Improving the condition of the African people of South Africa'

Sarah, his mother was born in Bethnal Green in London and met his father, David Forman, and immigrant from Lithuania on the boat sailing to South Africa. David had left his homeland because of the severe discrimination against Jews and in South Africa he was sympathetic to the cause of African liberation from the start. His mother was an intelligent woman with a wide world view, so they encouraged their son's educational endeavours. Early on he became avidly interested in the works of Marx, Lenin and their critics.

When Lionel was 17 he escaped the protectiveness of his parents and registered at the University of Cape Town where he obtained a Masters Degree in Social Science in 1948. The four years he spent at the University were crowded with political activity. He was the youngest member of the Communist Party and spent his days in the Students Socialist Party agitating against colour bar activities in the university, fighting train apartheid, making speeches on the Grand Parade and helping trade unionists to organise their workers. When NUSAS held an end-of-conference ball attended by Prime Minister Smuts attendance was restricted to white students. Forman and the Socialist students quickly mobilised their supporters and advertised a counter celebration inviting everyone and boycotting the official function. Their party was highly successful and well reported in the press and Forman was castigated by NUSAS whom he threatened to sue.

He returned to Johannesburg on completing his degree and registered for a Law Degree at Wits. He was elected editor of the "Wits Student" the University weekly newspaper, and converted it from a dull faculty sheet to an active, imaginative and popular paper with contributions from the arts, personalities and politics on the campus and outside it. At the time NUSAS was a member of the International Union of Students set up after the war to bring the students of the world into cooperation with each other. However the Yugoslav students were expelled from the IUS on the orders of Stalin at the time and NUSAS wanted to withdraw.

Forman had by 1951, been the first student to be denied a passport, but was then granted one for a year on health grounds to visit London. He took no notice of the restrictions placed on him and attended a conference of the IUS at which he suggested that a Unity Meeting be called to discuss the Yugoslav expulsion and called on NUSAS to hold fire. At the conference he was elected to the Executive of the IUS for a two-year period as a representative of NUSAS based in Prague Czechoslovakia. The Unity Meeting was not able to keep the western student unions in the IUS and they set up a separate student body.

Lionel had met Sadie Kreel on his return to Johannesburg from Cape Town and, after a time, they had agreed to marry. When he arrived in Prague he arranged for her to join him. They were married in Prague in 1952 and their first son was born there. At the end of 1953 the Formans returned to South Africa where Lionel had been asked to edit the left-wing newspaper *Advance* which was later banned and changed its name to *New Age*.



Working on *Advance* was stimulating and important for Forman. His political ideas were forming. He began to write about the need to understand race and racism, and particularly the 'National Question'. In 1954 The Forum Club organised a debate in which T. Ngwenya (ANC), K. Jordaan (Unity Movement), Jack Simons (UCT) and Forman (CP) participated. There was a sharp and continuing discussion but soon after the CP decided the National Question was a 'hot potato' and blocked further debate.

In 1956 Forman was one of the 156 arrested in the Treason Trial. He was given the task of reporting on the proceedings which he wrote up every week in *New Age*. The articles were informative and often amusing. Solly Sachs exiled in London suggested that Forman collaborate with him and write a book on the Trial. "The South African Treason Trial" appeared in the book shops in England in 1957 while the Trial was still on.

Researching the Trial, Forman became engrossed in the early history of South Africa and realised that to understand the present we had to know the past. He started writing regular articles in *New Age* on the political history of South Africa, much of which started in the Eastern Cape, in Kingwilliamstown, Cradock, Lovedale, Alice and so on. His first booklet, *Chapters in the March to Freedom* was sold out in a few months and reprinted. At the same time he was practising as an Advocate, and defending trade unionists and political activists. He had written his final Law exams on return from Prague.

Forman's writing output from 1954 to 1959 was prodigious. He wrote quickly and plainly and despite his defective heart and the pain that often went with it, his mind was clear. History and the National Question were his main focus, but he also did a regular column for the newspaper on international situations under the title of 'Commentator' and of course he also worked in chambers, appearing in court in defence of political accused.

The 1950's was a period of intense legislation and resistance, of farm labour scandals, potato and bus boycotts, of forced removals; the Defiance of Unjust Laws Campaign, the Congress of the People, at which the Freedom Charter entered South African history, and it was the decade when 20,000 women marched to Pretoria in their fight against the pass on August 9 1956. That year culminated at dawn on 5 December with the arrests on a charge of 'High Treason' of the 156 activists.

By then Lionel had accumulated a vast quantity of historical material – early newspapers like the *Christian Express*, *Imvo Zabantsundu* and *Abantu Batho*. A.W.G. Champion asked him to rescue his papers of the ICU (Industrial and Commercial Workers Union) from a shed in Phoenix. Those papers are now at the Jagger Library in UCT.

In 1959 with still a welter of work in front of him, Forman agreed to allow Chris Barnard to perform a heart-lung by-pass operation on him. That was on October 19. The operation failed and Lionel Forman died at the age of 31. Sadie Forman has given his papers to the University of Fort Hare Library. With Andre Odendaal she edited a selection of his writings entitled 'A Trumpet from the Housetops'.

The tributes poured in. His comrades in the trade unions wrote a song for him: Lionel Forman yindode encinane enkundleni mkhulu njenge ntabas yetafile, Mhla sashywa ngu Forman, Walile Umzi akwatyiwa mhla sahuzwa ngu Forman.....(Forman is a small man, but in court he is as big as Table Mountain)



Lionel Forman was born in Johannesburg on Christmas Day 1927. His parents, who met on the boat while immigrating to South Africa, owned a small shop. At the age of five, Lionel contracted rheumatic fever which left him with a defective heart. While leaving him to live a mostly sedentary life, his condition meant he could indulge his lively mind with reading and study. Lionel's studies began to form his political position, and at the age of 15 he joined the Young Communist League.

Lionel gained a M.Soc.Sci from the University of Cape Town, and in 1949 returned to Johannesburg to study law at the Witwatersrand University. As Editor of 'Wits' the student paper and while active in NUSAS (National Union of South African Students) he campaigned vigorously for NUSAS to retain affiliation with the IUSC (International Union of Students) in which 'Third World' universities were represented.

Because of his political activity, Forman was the first student to be refused a passport to travel to Europe. In 1951, he was given a passport for health reasons, provided he stay for only one year. He ignored these restraints and stayed in Europe for 2 years, helping to edit the World Student News. While in Prague, he was joined by Sadie Kreel where they were married. Their eldest son was born 11 months later.

The Formans returned to South Africa on New Year's Day 1954. Lionel edited the Congress newspaper Advance for three months. He was convinced that the best way to a united South Africa was to create conditions wherein the different cultures could flower and merge. He maintained that this could not happen without a simultaneous distribution of the country's wealth.

After completing the law degree he had started at Wits, Lionel set up as an advocate in Cape Town in November 1954. He soon became busy, being one of the few advocates who would readily represent activists in the Supreme Court. He was generous, giving his time to those who could not afford to pay for political cases and had no fear of 'tainting' his reputation.

On December 5<sup>th</sup> 1956, after a countrywide police raid, 156 people were arrested and charged with High Treason. Forman was one of these. He began covering the Treason Trial for the New Age paper (Advance had been banned). In March 1959, Solly Sachs invited him to co-author a book about the trial. The articles proved provocative and poke fun and contempt at the state, police, and the court.

Needless to say, the book *The South African Treason Trial* was banned in South Africa. Forman then started a People's History Series. Every week the New Age carried stories of the little known historical facts, which resulted in a booklet "Chapters in the History of the March to Freedom".

Needing to assure further historical accuracy, 1958 Lionel registered at University of Cape Town as a Ph.D candidate to write "The History of African Political Organizations 1870 - 1948". Only one chapter was completed. He was also involved in an article series "Maxism Today", printed in London.

In 1959, Lionel agreed to undergo heart surgery under Christian Barnard. The surgery was to help correct some of the damage that had been done to Lionel's heart as a child, and extend his life for a few more years. The surgery failed. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of October, 1959, Lionel Forman died at the age of 31. Tributes poured in, written for him by his friends and comrades, some whom he defended in court. Translated, one tribute says Lionel Forman was a small man, but in court he was as big as Table Mountain.

Lionel's wife Sadie was banned in South Africa for her own political activity, and eventually she and their three small children left to reside in England. She resumed her teaching career but remained active in anti-apartheid politics. She helped to edit a book "A Trumpet from the Housetops" of major selections of Lionel's writings. She is presently doing a two-year volunteership at the Library of Fort Hare University under the auspices of the Canon Collins Foundation. She is also processing Lionel Forman's papers, which she has donated to Fort Hare.

Information about the Forman papers may be obtained from the Howard Pim Library.