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Biography

Lionel Forman was born in Johannesburg on Christmas Day 1927 to David Forman and Sarah Shribnick. His father was an immigrant from Lithuania, having fled the anti-Semitic pogroms and poverty of Eastern Europe. Sarah was born in Bethnal Green in London of poor parents who decided to go to South Africa in the early 1920s. The two met on the boat sailing to where "the streets were paved with gold".

The reality was very different. Lionel grew up in Rosettenville, a white working class area where his parents rented a small shop and worked long hours, living in two rooms attached to the shop. At the age of five he contracted rheumatic fever, which left him with a defective heart so that his school life was marked by many absences. It was with satisfaction that he did not have to attend military cadets at Forest High School. An enforced sedentary life meant that he could indulge his lively mind with reading, which began early. His political position was also then in the making.

As a child he made a friend of a black worker in the backyard of the shop. The young man was assaulted and instead of getting justice was further punished and lost his job. Lionel later wrote about him in a short story. At school he won a national essay competition on "How to Improve the Conditions of the African People". Then 15, he joined the Young Communist League. Active in the debating society, he was elected to the national committee and together with co-delegate Ruth First attended the first national YCL conference. A provocative speech on a Party platform criticising the action of the leadership in neglecting the African Advisory Board elections while concentrating on the white General Election, was ill received. Ruth saved him from possible expulsion.

Lionel left Johannesburg to go to the University of Cape Town where he gained a M.Soc.Sci. Most of his time was taken in political action. In 1947 he led a boycott of a Mayoral reception which was 'Whites Only' during a NUSAS (National Union of South African Students) Conference and organised instead a highly successful 'no colour-bar dance'. (*Cape Argus*, 3 July 1947). NUSAS expelled him but had to retract when he threatened them with legal action unless they published an apology in three national newspapers. His understanding of law was burgeoning.

The Guardian was the unofficial newspaper of the Communist Party and was popular with black readers. Forman reported for the paper, organised, wrote pamphlets and spoke regularly at meetings on the Grand Parade. He was also secretary of the Students Socialist Party at the time. On the *Train Apartheid Resistance Committee* he said he learned an important political lesson: "Talk and theory were useless without the courage to face the enemy" - something he practised constantly.

Forman returned to Johannesburg at the end of 1949 to study law at the Witwatersrand University. In 1948, after the Nationalists came to power, the Communist Party knew they would be banned and were deciding to dissolve the Party. Forman was strongly opposed to this decision which pre-empted the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950. No other Communist Party had ever taken such action he said.

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At Wits Forman took over the editorship of *Wits*, the student paper in 1950. He transformed it from a bland, faculty broadsheet filled with narrow columns of print, into a lively campus newspaper with cartoons and sharp political commentary. After a fierce all-night debate at a NUSAS conference in Grahamstown, Forman was elected Director of Research by 5 am. The cold war between the West and the Soviet Union was reflected in student politics by the liberals who were against, and the left, who wanted to retain NUSAS affiliation to the International Union of Students (IUS), based in Prague. Forman campaigned vigorously in *Wits* to remain in the world student body in which 'Third World' universities were represented, and which he saw as being anti-imperialist.

Forman was the first student to be refused a passport to travel to Europe on a NUSAS tour. On health grounds he was finally given a passport for one year in 1951, on condition that he saw only doctors and did not travel. He ignored these constraints and represented NUSAS at an IUS conference in Warsaw in August 1951. Western delegates argued to withdraw from the IUS but Forman persuaded them to remain and to thrash out the problem of the expulsion of the Yugoslav students from the IUS (after Tito's break with Moscow). He proposed a 'Unity Meeting' be held the following year. This was agreed and Forman was delegated by NUSAS to stay on in Prague to work at IUS headquarters. Charles Bloomberg, who then edited *Wits* wrote this was "unparalleled in NUSAS international relations" (6 July 1952).

The Unity Meeting was held in Bucharest in August 1952 but failed to preserve student unity. The steady deterioration of East-West relations could not contain a single student body and the Western students formed a Coordinating Secretariat. But Forman relished the two years spent in Prague, working with students from all over the world, and editing *"World Student News"*. His health had been well maintained by the Czech doctors. Three months after his arrival Sadie Kreel joined him, they were married in the Prague Old Town Hall and their son was born 11 months later. By August his two-year contract was over and it was time to leave.

On the way back to South Africa the Formans stopped in Seaford Sussex for 5 months where Lionel wrote an autobiography dedicated to his son. A letter from Brian Bunting asking him to edit *Advance*, the Congress newspaper, for four months, was appealing and the family set foot in Cape Town on New Years' day 1954. Luggage was minutely searched but the manuscript was not found, and there was much customs agitation as Forman's passport had expired the previous year. (The book he wrote was later hidden but never again found).

His work on the newspaper was not without controversy. He launched a debate on the 'National Question', wanting the word "race" to be substituted by "national group". "Race" was helping to "keep us in slavery" he said. The importance of language and culture needed greater recognition. The struggle had to be taken, he wrote,

"into every kraal, hessian shack and pondokkie in terms the people can understand.... Our Zulu poets must sing songs of liberation in their mother tongue - the people must rock with laughter at Sotho satires on the Nats. Let our very folk dances exemplify a kick in the pants for Malan and our music the drumbeats of freedom".

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He felt the liberation movement would "stumble and falter" if the forces of progressive nationalism were not understood. The National Question became an overriding concern for him. The Forum and South Africa Clubs in Cape Town convened a symposium he initiated in May 1954. Participants were Lionel Forman, Kenny Jordaan of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM), Thomas Ngwenya (ANC), Jack Simons, noted lecturer and Marxist whose position was the dominant one of the ANC and SACP. They said the liberation movement had to stress the one-nation aspect of South Africans. Forman's view was that unless there was an ongoing understanding of the aspirations of the majority of South Africans once the apartheid government was overthrown, it would not be possible to build an equitable society. He was convinced that the best way to a single united South African nation was to create conditions wherein "the different national cultures in South Africa may first flower and then merge". This he maintained would have to occur with a simultaneous redistribution of the wealth of the country. His consistent contention was the debate should be ongoing to find answers.

On Bunting's return Forman decided to complete the law degree he had started at Wits. In November 1954 he set up as an advocate in Parliament Chambers in Cape Town. He was soon defending trade unionists and victims of apartheid. His cases were regularly reported in the press and his clients spoke of him with gratitude and affection. A colleague said he was brilliant in court and "extremely valuable to the movement" because he was one of the few advocates at the time who would readily represent activists in the supreme court. He did not charge for political cases where clients had no funds and he was not concerned about 'tainting' his reputation with 'politics'.

He continued to work on the newspaper, writing a regular column and editing from time-to-time. Then on December 5th, 1956, the police swooped on homes all over the country, from mansions to the humblest shack, and arrested 156 souls on a charge of High Treason. Forman was taken from his home in Cape Town to the Fort in Johannesburg. The sentence for Treason was death.

The Treason Trial was cause for Lionel to focus his energy. He soon began covering news from the "Treason Cage" in the newspaper, which was now named *New Age*, as *Advance* had been banned. In March 1957 he accepted an invitation from Solly Sachs in London to co-write a book about the trial. He set to work and his weekly reports, eagerly awaited were incorporated into a book. The articles were provocative and poked fun and contempt at the state, the police and the court

The book "The South African Treason Trial" was banned in South Africa but was well publicised overseas and drew attention to the trial. As he wrote about the trial Forman found that he became increasingly involved in the history of South Africa and resolved to write a "Peoples' History". Every week *New Age* carried stories from the past that were little known: 'Van Riebeeck was a Robber', 'Why did Dingaan Kill Retief', the 'Bulhoek Massacre', the 'Bondelswarts Rebellion', the 1913 women's protest against the pass laws, all on the anniversary dates of the events. Sustained research resulted, with the decision to publish the work in booklet form to be made available cheaply. The first booklet "Chapters in the History of the March to Freedom" had to be reprinted soon after it appeared. Peoples' history is commonplace now, but then it was unusual, original.

Knowing that there was a need for historical accuracy, that he was not trained in historiography, in 1958 Forman registered at UCT to do a Ph.D. on the "History of

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African Political Organisations, 1870-1948". At the same time he remained engrossed in his work on seeking for the roots of an African nation, which generated a series of

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articles in *Marxism Today* in London. He had submitted one chapter of his thesis to his supervisor, Dr. L. Thompson when he agreed to have a heart operation.

By 1959, Christian Barnard had developed a heart-lung by-pass machine which he had used successfully in some eight operations and Lionel assented to undergo surgery on 19th October. The operation failed. Forman died at the age of 31. Tributes poured in and the song written for him by his friends and comrades, some of whom he had defended in court, said Lionel Forman is a small man, but in court he is as big as Table Mountain:

Lionel Forman yindode' encinane
enkundleni mkhulu njenge ntaba zetafile

Mhla sashiywa ngu Forman

Walile umzi akwatyiwa

Amhlopephantsi ko mahlaba amathambo'om Afrika

Isahleli entliziyweni imisebenzi ka Forman

Amhlophe

phantsi

komahlaba

amathambo'om

Afrika