George Bizos

Born in Greece in 1928, George Bizos fled his native country after the German invasion of 1941. Arriving with his father in Johannesburg, the 13 year-old understood no English. Yet, he graduated from Wits Law School and in 1954 was admitted to the Johannesburg Bar. He built an illustrious career on defending victims of apartheid human rights abuses, often acting in the 1950s for the practice of Mandela and Tambo. He represented the ANC at South Africa’s post-1994 constitutional hearings. At present he sits on the bench of the Johannesburg High Court. George Bizos and his wife Arethe have three sons. He spends much of his spare time gardening. Odyssey to Freedom is his second book, after No One to Blame? – In Pursuit of Legal Justice in South Africa.

This story has been extracted with his permission from Odyssey to Freedom.

The Right to Learn

By George Bizos.

As a young boy in Greece

George Bizos’ parents instilled a love for learning in him at an early age. I began school in September, 1935. Very few girls were sent to school by their parents. When we asked our mother why she hadn’t gone to school, she said that her parents, like all others in the village, believed that if you sent girls to school they would form relationships with boys-something which is frowned upon. My mother added with a smile, “little did they know how much easier it was to form relationships when you looked after sheep and goats in the fields”.

My father was always good to me and he never raised a hand to me. Unlike my over-industrious mother, he did not expect me to do
much manual labour. He always considered that education for me, my brothers and sister would be worth very much more than our contribution to the household needs.

**As a young boy in South Africa**

One day while serving a customer, I noticed a young woman in the middle of the shop staring at me. She was wearing a blue blazer with white and yellow stripes and a badge on the pocket with the head of a goat sporting long, upward turned horns. There was a motto underneath but I couldn’t read it, much less understand what it meant. As she waited her turn she stared at me. When I served her, she turned her head sideways, smiled, and asked, “Are you not the boy whose photo appeared in the newspaper? With your father? The ones that escaped from the Germans?” I said I was. With an even broader smile she reached across the counter to shake my hand. “What school do you go to?” I told her I didn’t go to school. She asked to speak to my father and, when I said he worked in Pretoria, she waited for Mr. Bill to finish serving a customer.

She introduced herself as Cecilia Feinstein, a teacher. Although the shop was busy – it was later afternoon and many people got off the tram at the nearby stop – she bombarded Mr. Bill with questions about me and my father. Why was I not at school? How could she get in touch with my father? How old was I? How far had I gone at school before I came to South Africa? Would he get in touch with my father regarding my going to school again? Then she said she would come back in a day or two, by which time she hoped all would have agreed that she could take me to her school the following Monday. The 1943 school year had already started, but she would arrange with the principal to have me admitted. We left a telephone message with the owner of the cafe where my father had his meals. He was only too happy for me to go to school, but asked if the two partners could keep an eye on me. He was now earning enough to pay for my room and would come
every second weekend to give me money. Mr. Bill was happy
to pay for my room and give me whatever else was necessary.
I could earn my keep by helping them in the shop after
school. The young teacher came back and was delighted to
hear the decision. Would I put on my best clothes, including
the cap that I wore when the newspaper photograph was
taken, and be ready at 7:00 the next morning? She would
take me to Malvern Jr. High, a school offering standards 6-8.

In the meantime, I must work hard at school. I agreed, as
I did not want to be a shop assistant all my life. If I learn
to read and write properly I could become a commercial
traveller such as those who came to the shop to take orders.
Then I would drive a motor car and work for just a few hours
a day. My father had other ideas. He hoped I would [sic]
go to university and qualify as a doctor. The next morning
we went to the central Johannesburg post office, where he
deposited £50 in my name. I wondered why. Was it because
he was embarrassed that he could not read or write English?
Or because he wanted to show his confidence in me? Or even
to indicate that he was serious about finding some way to
finance my further education? I think that he probably did it
for all these reasons.

I lost touch with Ms. Feinstein. To my shame; it was almost
30 years before I took steps to find her. The Feinsteins are
well represented in the legal and accountancy professions and
eventually a senior attorney told me that he and she were
distant cousins. He believed she was in East London. Once
I had her telephone number, I spent hours thinking what
my opening words should be and how I should address her.
I even wondered if she'd forgot me. After all, to her I might
not have been more than one of many. But I had told my wife
and later my boys about her and I was under pressure from
them to do something about it. So I dialled the number. A
high-pitched African female voice said a cheerful “hello”. The madam was out and would be back at lunch time. After 30 years it did not seem proper to leave a message, so I said that I would phone again and did not mention my name or number. About 15 minutes later, my office telephone rang. “Hello, George, is it you? It’s Cecilia speaking. Did you phone a short while ago? “. “Yes, I did,” I said, astonished. “I have been waiting for your call since yesterday when I heard you were looking for me. I thought it must have been you that phoned earlier, but I just couldn’t wait anymore. I so badly wanted to speak to you. I have been following your cases, and I’m so proud of you.” “And I’m so grateful to you,” I said. “If it had not been for you, I don’t know what I would have done with my life.” It was a long conversation. We spoke about our families and I asked if she would come to Johannesburg to stay with us and meet my family. She said she would. She had family she wanted to visit, but she also wanted to meet my family particularly to tell my sons the sort of boy their father had been. We promised to keep in touch and I said that I would visit her when I went to the Eastern Cape. I did not keep that promise, but neither did I forget her.

Some years later, in 1996 when the University of Natal in Durban conferred an honorary doctorate of law on me, they asked who I would like to be invited to the ceremony. Cecilia Feinstein was top of the list and after more than 50 years I was able to make a public acknowledgement of her role, explaining that it was she who started me off on the route I had followed. I often wonder what I would have made of my life if she had not insisted that, refugee or not, I was entitled to the right to learn.