

A True Afrikaner

by

Mary Benson

Visiting the Nevada desert with a friend in the autumn of 1974, I realized it was time to write a letter to Bram Fischer. It was eight years since I had seen him, eight years in which we had only occasionally been able to exchange letters: 500 words the limit, with no mention of politics or world affairs. But how, I wondered aloud, could I write about all the beauty of this desert to a man in a prison cell?

It was Bram who had opened my eyes to the beauty of barren landscapes, as we drove through the winter veld of the southern Transvaal. But now, to describe this space and freedom to a prisoner, to a man walled in, who saw only a scrap of sky from the exercise yard?

I began to shape the letter, counting the words, and the next morning I settled in the shade of cottonwood trees and wrote to him: Abram Fischer, an Afrikaner – grandson of a Prime Minister of the Orange River Colony – a distinguished lawyer and communist, in prison on Potgieter Street, Pretoria. The prison had been a part of my childhood, for we lived in the house next door and went for walks past its façade, watched by eyes peering through iron-barred windows. Its turreted walls, rising beyond our trees, were the background of snapshots in the family album. I tried to imagine him there, in a modern high-security section designed for the handful of South Africa's white political prisoners. Could he glimpse anything of the night sky from his little window?

Perhaps the Nevada desert would have reminded him of the veld, South Africans have an expression, *'n ware Afrikaner*, a true Afrikaner. In the sense that 'true' means typical, Bram was a true Afrikaner in

his passion for the veld; for me he as *'n ware Afrikaner* in a more profound way.

I met him during the first great treason trial in 1959, in which 156 people of all races had been arrested. He was among counsel for the defense. What first struck me was his courtesy: it never faltered even when some remark by the prosecutor or an action by the police angered him, hardening the expression in his blue eyes. Not physically impressive – short, ruddy-faced with silver hair – he was nonetheless an immensely captivating man. I got to know him better when, unexpectedly, he was granted a passport to come to London in October 1964 – unexpected because he had just been arrested in Johannesburg and, with twelve others, had been charged with membership of the illegal Communist Party. He was in London to lead an appeal on behalf of the Bayer Company before the Privy Council. He had assured the South African authorities that he would return there to stand trial.

His short visit was both celebratory and arduous, seeing old friends and new, packing in visits to the theatre between serious discussions. He seldom spoke of himself; he was concerned rather to convey precisely what was happening under the ninety-day detention law. It was a terrible time in South Africa: through solitary confinement and torture the State – as Bram put it – was trying to break the forces striving for basic human rights. Militant opponents of the government had been intimidated, imprisoned or driven into exile. Innumerable political trials were taking place throughout the country. To Hugh Caradon, British Ambassador to the United Nations, Bram described the effects of police torture: a young Indian, Suliman Salojee, had somehow managed to smuggle a message to his wife from solitary confinement. 'Pray for me,' he had said. Bram could barely contain his wrath and grief as he explained that Salojee was not a religious man; a day or two later, while being interrogated, he had fallen seven stories to his death from Security Police headquarters.

Influential politicians were profoundly impressed by Bram's calm courage. They tried to persuade him to remain in Britain rather than return home to almost certain imprisonment. 'But I gave my world,' he told them. From the bar of the Privy Council, Abram Fischer Q.C. went to the dock in a Johannesburg Magistrate's court.

The chief State witnesses in the trial were Gerald Ludi, a police spy who had been a member of a Communist Party cell, and Piet Beyleveld, who had been a friend of Bram's – a Afrikaner, long a leading member of the Party. Both agreed that the activities of the Party centered largely on propaganda about injustices. The very issues about which the English language press and the Liberal and Progressive parties legally protested became illegal when the Communist party protested. But Ludi also declared that the Communists aimed to overthrow the government by violent revolution. Beyleveld contradicted this: revolution, he contended, did not mean violence but change. The Party had condemned acts of terrorism and insisted there must be no bloodshed.

'For years, Piet Beyleveld and I were comrades,' Bram told me. 'I do not believe that when he comes into court, when he looks me in the eyes, he will be able to give evidence against us.' But Beyleveld went into court, he stood in the witness box, and he did not look Bram in the eyes. When asked by the defense why he was giving evidence, he said he had agreed after persistent questioning by the Security Police; there had been no ill-treatment. Questioned further, he gave a startlingly accurate account of Bram's nature and influence. Fischer, he said, was well-known as a champion of the oppressed, with political views that had never been concealed; a man widely respected in all parts of the community. He himself, he added, still revered Fischer.

I could imagine the distress this admission must have caused Bram, who seemed to feel no bitterness against his old friend, only anger at the system which manipulated such as easy betrayal. The defense counsel must have been astounded. 'I was interested to hear you say that,' he remarked to Beyleveld, and then asked, 'I don't like to put

this in my client's presence, but he is a man who carried something of an aura of a saint-like quality, does he not?'

'I agree,' was Beyleveld's reply.

After Christmas, when the trial had reconvened, I met Bram in a coffee-bar. His gaze was unusually intense, but I put this down to our activity over the previous days: I had encouraged him to write an article expressing his views about the crisis in the country, which would be suitable for the London *Observer*. Coming from him it was a seditious, illegal document, and he was worried lest I be incriminated as a fellow-conspirator. Throughout the adjournment he had been openly followed by Security Police, but he was sure that on this occasion he had given them the slip. He handed me the final copy of the piece. Then, gripping my hands, he asked me to be sure and come to court on Monday. Of course, I said. With a light kiss and a '*Totsiens*' – till I see you – he left me.

On Monday 25 January 1965 a friend who was staying with the Fischers stopped me as I approached the courtroom, drew me into an empty waiting-room and handed me a letter. 'Bram has gone underground,' she confided.

'I feel incredibly dishonest and have ever since our talk on Friday,' Bram wrote.

This is so not because I am about to 'jump' my bail. The other side has never played according to the rules and has changed the rules whenever it has suited them. That is the least of my 'moral' worries. But throughout our talk I had to act to you and pretend I would see you on Monday and that was a singularly unpleasant experience.

In some ways I suppose this would seem to be a crazy decision. Yet I feel it is up to someone among the whites to demonstrate a spirit of protest. It must be demonstrated that people can fight apartheid from within the country even though it may be

dangerous. That is why I returned here from London. I have left the trial because I also want to demonstrate that no one should meekly submit to our barbaric laws. I'm sure we shall meet again.

Everything seemed normal in the court. Police and officials, defense and prosecution teams were present, and the other twelve accused filed up from the cells below. Except no sign of Bram. The previous week I had nervously attended the trial for the first time; he had entered the court by a side door and stood for a moment, looking directly at me in the public gallery. No greeting, only the acknowledgment of my presence. Now there was a rustling through the courtroom; the magistrate took his seat, leading counsel for the defense rose and announced that he had a letter from Number One Accused, Abram Fischer, and proceeded to read it. Bram had decided to absent himself from the trial. This act, he said, had not been prompted by fear of punishment – indeed, he realized his eventual punishment might be increased. He believed that white complacency in the face of the monstrous policy of apartheid made bloodshed inevitable. 'To try to avoid this,' he declared, 'becomes a supreme duty, particularly for an Afrikaner. If by my fight I can encourage even some people to think about, to understand and to abandon the policies they now so blindly follow. I shall not regret any punishment I may incur. I can no longer serve justice in the way I have attempted to do during the past thirty years.'

The Prosecutor called it 'the desperate act of a desperate man, and the action of a coward.' Conflicting views were vehemently expressed, in private and public. Some felt it a futile gesture. Others were elated at a magnificent act of protest. Some felt 'let down' because he was 'the one man who could have united everyone.' Fischer, commented the editor of the Johannesburg *Sunday Times*, was 'a paragon, the model of gentleness and respectability' who, when young, 'had been regarded as a future Prime Minister or Chief Justice.' Now the tragedy was that he had become 'a hunted fugitive ostracized by society.'

Under the byline 'From a Special Correspondent in Johannesburg', Bram's article, which I had mailed to the London *Observer*, was headlined WORD FROM MISSING Q C:

The State thinks it has crushed the liberation movement, but it has not. . . If the struggle for freedom is smothered in one place or for the time being, it flares up again before long. . .

Word opinion has positive and constructive tasks to perform. It must prevent torture from being used again. . .and should work for the release of our thousands of political prisoners; the wives and dependents of these prisoners must be cared for. . . But most important is the extension of human rights to all citizens. This is not Spain. It is 1965, not 1935. . . The United Nations can bring home to white South Africans the recognition that the maintenance of white supremacy is doomed.

Bram's message to the outside world, written with passionate urgency more than twenty years ago, has gained the weight of prophecy:

A peaceful transition can be brought about if the Government agrees to negotiation with all sections of the people, and, in particular, with the non-white leaders at present jailed on Robben Island or in exile.

He concluded with a vision of a free South Africa: at last the country would fulfill its great potential internally, and in African and world affairs. When copies appeared for sale in Johannesburg, Bram's article had been neatly excised.

The South African press made only one brief reference to it, reporting that it has been cut out of copies on sale in shops. Since Fischer was on the banned list, he could not be quoted in South Africa.

Within days of his disappearance, the Johannesburg Bar Council – of which he had once been Chairman – applied to have his name struck

from the roll of advocates. FIRST WORD COMES FROM BRAAM FISCHER (*sic*), the evening paper announced on 5 March. In protest against the Bar Council's action, he had written to lawyers, requesting legal opposition to the proposed expulsion.

Weeks passed. The English language press enjoyed taunting the police. BRAM FISCHER STILL FREE. The authorities said he might be disguised as a black-haired priest with dark glasses, or as an elderly invalid woman swathed in shawls. FISCHER COULD BE ANYWHERE FROM MALMESBURY TO MOSCOW.

In a sitting-room in Johannesburg, the curtains drawn against the night, two women sat beside me on a sofa. They had asked to see me urgently. I was warned that the room might be bugged. Gaps in their soft quickly-uttered sentences were filled by words they wrote on paper. They had seen Bram. He was known as Max. I watched the hand as it wrote, 'Max is depressed and isolated, will you visit him?'

'Of course,' I said, and wrote, 'When?'

'Tomorrow.'

The word took me aback. it gave me no time to prepare. Might not the police follow me? But how wonderful to see him again, how proud I felt to be asked. What were the implications of meeting a fugitive? I cared greatly for him. 'Yes,' I said.

A map was drawn, showing the street, the house, a nearby shopping centre and a discreet approach so as to ensure no police were following. 'Try to look as unlike yourself as possible,' was the final note.

Writing now of those events, in the detail made possible by the coded notes I kept, I can feel against eh apprehension – and exhilaration – of being caught up in such a drama.

On a bright autumn day, my face obscured by heavy suntan make-up and an elaborate headscarf, I arrived at an ugly yellow-brick house with fancy iron railings. head held high but with shaky knees, I walked up a long drive past an unkempt garden and tennis court. No one was visible in the neighboring house. Pressing the doorbell, I hear its chime but no movement. I rang again and this time the door was opened by an African woman. There had been no mention of a servant. 'Is the master in?'

She motioned me through a bare hall to a large room furnished only with cane garden chairs and a table. I noticed an ashtray with pipe and matches. Btu Bram did not smoke. A sound made me swing round. A man was standing there, staring at me. Auburn-bearded, balding with receding auburn hair, his eyes blank behind rimless spectacles. Jesus – I had come to the wrong house. How could I explain and get out?

'Good God!' he said. It was the familiar voice, the warm, slightly accented voice. 'What are you doing here? How wonderful!'

Weird to embrace this strange-looking man – but the voice, the smile, were his. He was delighted and reassured by my failure to recognize him. 'You look like Lenin,' I eased. But he had not lost a mannerism of clearing his throat, nor a certain gesture with one hand.

He picked up the pipe. 'I've taken to smoking, it helps disguise my voice. And see how thin I've got. My walk,' he demonstrated. 'Not so bandy-legged.' I had heard his health was troublesome, but he said his high blood pressure was now under control. Seeing a doctor had been one of the tests of the disguise – a disguise accomplished by dieting, by shaving the crown of his head then dying his hair, eyebrows and beard to a colour natural to his reddish complexion.

The maid, Josephine, brought tea. As we talked, I began to realize just how cut-off he was, he who had led an immensely active professional and social life. I sensed how deeply he was missing family and

friends. The time was up too soon. I would come again in a week, on Josephine's day off.

In the days that followed I marveled that he was here, living in the heart of Johannesburg, within a mile or so of his old home. The police were scouring the country for him – a substantial reward had been offered for his capture. I thought of him, alone but for the maid, in that awful house. It was sickening that a man of such integrity should be forced to resort to subterfuge and lies.

'Get yourself a hat,' he had said. In the OK Bazaar I bought one, emerald-green to match a borrowed green-and-white suit: I had to look normal when I left my sister's flat, where I was staying, and arrive at Bram's house looking, I hoped, like a district nurse.

I was glad when he chose to have tea in the front garden rather than in the bleak, sparsely furnished house – he explained that he did not want to use his limited funds on unnecessary comforts. He enjoyed the informality of his new life, being able to wear sports shirts and flannels, and each week he grew more confident: a leading member of the Security Police had passed him in the street, a judge he knew well had stood beside him in a lift. Someone he had met for the first time had guessed he was in his thirties. But he wondered if he should go on with his hermit's existence, or join the local bowling club, become a new personality. He rehearsed me in preparation for possible encounters with the police. I was to say I had met "Max" only recently, through friends. I found it hard to think of him as Max, although he was not quite Bram either.

On my second visit I had just handed him a cup of tea when footsteps crunched up the drive, I glimpsed a white man before I turned away saying to myself, 'Good heavens, no, his name is Max.' But Bram rose to intercept the stranger and lead him to the house. He had come about the electricity. I thought of how Bram could be caught over something quite trivial. Josephine was having problems over her pass-book – what if just coping with that led to his capture?

When we had relaxed again, Bram fed crumbs to sparrows in the dry grass. how different it had been three months earlier at his old home, when he had given a Sunday lunch party for family and a few close friends. he had led me towards a cool corner by the front door. 'Look, Molly's special garden.' Small rare plants she had set in evergreen grass. 'It's a real monument to her,' he had said.

In 1961, when Bram was in Rhodesia on an important arbitration case, he had telephoned Molly every evening. I was staying with her and their son Paul at the time. After twenty-five years of marriage she had been like a girl preparing to meet her lover as she chose a new outfit for Bram's return. Then, in 1964, the night after he had concluded the defense of Nelson Mandela and the other men in the Rivonia trial, he and Molly set off for Cape Town to celebrate their daughter Ilse's twenty-first birthday. Crossing a bridge in the darkness Bram swerved to avoid a cow, and crashed into a stream. Molly, trapped in the car, drowned.

Bram without Molly The triumph of saving the Rivonia men from hanging had just been muted by the anguish of their life sentences – and now came this cruel, intolerable tragedy. There was no way I could try to console him.

In his letter telling me he was going underground Bram had concluded, 'It is very early in the morning and a glow is touching the garden that Molly and I tended for more than twenty-five years. I have wondered and wondered what she would advise in the present circumstances. I think she would have approved.'

BRAM SEEN CROSSING BECHUANALAND BORDER.
FISCHER SEEN IN DAR ES SALAAM.

How little he was understood. he had said he would not leave South Africa. 'Our place is *here*.' How often I heard him say that. And I had witnessed the extremes of his feelings: his fury when he heard that a comrade had fled the country – fury aroused not by the man's action but by the Security Police, who tortured and broke people and drove

them to flight; his exuberance when I returned to Johannesburg despite fears that I might be arrested for lobbying at the United Nations. 'It was like the coming of a whole battalion,' he had said in welcome.

I did not want to know what Bram was doing or who he was seeing on the other days of the week. The ninety-day detention law had been suspended but it could be brought back at any moment.; the less I knew, the better. Clearly, he was having to start from scratch.

Usually we met once a week. He loved to hear about friends. Alan Paton was in town and Bram wished he could see him. 'I'd give anything. . .' During the Rivonia trial he had visited Paton in Natal to ask if he would speak in favour of mitigation of sentence. he had hardly made the request before Paton agreed. 'But you've not heard all the facts,' Bram protested.

Paton replied, 'You told me that it's a matter of life and death.'

Judgment day in the trial of Bram's comrades: I waited in the main street of Benoni, a mining town. His Volkswagen approached, on time, and we headed for the southern border of the Transvaal. I was happy to be with him and relieved to escape the tension of the court.

We talked of his children, who were never far from his thoughts: Ruth and her husband were in London and, before going underground, Bram had sent his teenage son Paul to join them. Ilse was in Johannesburg. he worried about her having to cope with letting their old home. Packing before the move, Ilse had shown me family papers and mementoes removed from Bram's chambers.

Among the yellowed pages of letters which Ilse had shown me was one from Ouma Steyn, wife of the President of the Orange Free State, to Bram on his twenty-first birthday: '*As kind en as student was jy 'n voorbeeld vir almal, en ek weet dat jy not'n eervollik rol gaan speel in die geskiedenis van Suid Afrika.*' (As a child and as a student you were an

example to everyone, and I know you will play an honourable role in the history of South Africa.) As Bram and I drove through the dried-out veld of the southern Transvaal, I said how moved I had been on reading Mrs. Steyn's letter. 'What would Ouma say if she could see me now?' He tried to make a joke of it.

We began to talk of the Afrikaans language. Wanting to lighten his mood I recited a poem lodged in my brain since I had unwillingly learned it at school:

*Dis donker, donker middernag
Nader krulp die Zulumag
Kruip swart adders om die laer. . .*

(It's dark, dark midnight. The Zulu forces creep nearer. Black snakes creep around the laager.) 'It's so ugly and gutteral,' I protested.

'But it's a poetic language!' came his impassioned retort. 'Listen: *motreen* – moth rain – that soft rain. And *douvoordag* – dew before daybreak.' I had to concede that when he spoke those words, they sounded beautiful.

The Transkei homeland had recently chosen English as the first language in their schools and this, I thought, was good. 'Why good?' Bram asked. 'On the contrary, it's sad that my people, through their actions, are turning Africans against Afrikaans. Now it's the Transkei, ultimately all will be lost. In my ideal state we would try to preserve the language.'

When he spoke of his people, perplexity, anger and love clashed. Their historic Great Trek from the Cape early in the nineteenth century had been precipitated by the desire for freedom from British control. But they also wanted the freedom to own slaves, so were they freedom-fighters or oppressors? Bram thought one of their leaders, Piet Retief, had some fine ideas: 'His Manifesto in 1837 spoke of upholding the "just principle of liberty" – his followers would not

molest others nor deprive them of property: they wanted peace and friendly intercourse with the African tribes.

‘What made us rebels,’ Bram said, ‘was the Boer War.’ His grandfather, a Member of Parliament at the age of twenty-five, had tried to moderate the Boer leader, President Kruger, while keeping at bay ‘the wily old imperialist Milner’. When such efforts failed and war broke out in the 1899, Bram’s grandfather rallied people to the Boer cause, addressing endless meetings in dusty little dorps, coaching Hertzog, among the more extreme of their generals, in politics while keeping in touch with the moderates, Smuts and Botha. Listening to Bram talk about the war, I was struck by how real it seemed for him although he was born six years after it ended. His family had town and country houses and, like many Afrikaners, they were left with little but a few ornaments. British soldiers tore pages from their set of Dickens to stuff pillows.

When the British ceded power to white South Africans under the Act of Union, Bram’s grandfather, as Minister of Lands, pushed through the 1913 Natives Land Act dispossessing Africans of their land, restricting four million of them to less than eight percent of the country. The million whites obtained access to more than ninety percent. ‘Even up to 1926,’ Bram said, ‘Afrikaner Nationalism was a progressive force – against oppression, against big monopoly capital and *for* the working class, *for* the Jews. Why, in the early forties I had lunch with Verwoerd; he was trying to make up his mind whether to be a Nationalist or a Socialist!’

Bram laughed at that recollection, but the laugh turned to a sigh. ‘Today in all South Africa Afrikaners are only about eight percent of the population, and who in the outside world backs them!’ Perhaps, he mused, an oppressed people are always progressive until they get power; so, once Afrikaners attained it, their nationalism escalated into domination over the blacks, a domination to which it seemed there was no limit. It struck me that Bram’s sacrifice of family, career and freedom had essentially been inspired by his Afrikaner heritage. He had implied as much in his letter to the magistrate in the trial: as

an Afrikaner, he sought to make some reparation for the misdeeds of his people.

For me, sensing this as we drove on that day, there was also an intensely personal experience. Just as reading *Cry, the Beloved Country* had shattered my prejudice against the blacks, so now Bram had blown away the cobwebs of my childhood perception of Afrikaners as alien. Not our few Afrikaner friends, of course, who were Smuts supporters and spoke English, but 'Nats': my father used to joke that he'd left Ireland to escape a bunch of rebels, but at least in Ireland they had a sense of humour.

We reached our destination, Volksrust, and Bram drew up at the post office to mail letters to Helen Suzman and to Beyers Naude. He wanted to express his appreciation of their courage and tenacity in opposing apartheid, but it was also a way of demonstrating he was still in the country. However, such gestures soon staled. His letters to newspaper editors and other individuals, sent from each of the four provinces, had already been publicized. Besides, as a 'listed' communist his actual words could not be quoted. He wanted to support black political action, but it had been crushed through years of arrests and political trials. His success in evading capture seemed to me in itself the most potent form of protest.

'Molly and I often brought the children here.' He had turned off the main road to drive down a dirt track to a kloof. 'We were both so busy and picnics were the times we could all be together.' His pleasure in returning to those familiar spots gave me a sense of how desperately he missed Molly. Yet he was always the perfect host: the fire deftly made, the meat well-grilled, the drinks iced; the picnic was a festive occasion. He identified birds and trees and, after we had eaten, he shared a letter from his son Paul, proud of the literary style and amusing comments on life in London.

The sun, lighting the shaved area of his head, exposed white roots where the auburn hair began. 'Your hair,' I said, 'it's beginning to

show.' Later, when we arrived in the suburbs, he drew up outside a chemist, where I bought the dye he used for his hair.

12 REDS ARE FOUND GUILTY. We stopped for an evening paper. His old friends, Eli Weinberg and Ivan Schermbrucker, had been sentenced to five years, the young communists to two. Five years. That was the sentence he would have been given.

That winter I spent six weeks reporting on political trials in the Eastern Cape and exchanged postcards with 'Max'. Speculation about him continued in the press: 'Throughout Southwest Africa police man roadblocks on all the main highways after tourists reports seeing Abram Fischer at the Etosha Pan. A Johannesburg professional man was detained at Warmbaths police station; he was mistaken for Abram Fischer Q.C.'

Bram had been underground for more than six months.

Back in Johannesburg, I found that he had moved. To my relief he was much more security-conscious than before and when we met on a corner one evening, he asked me to close my eyes until we had driven in the gate to the new house. It was semi-detached but he hardly saw his neighbours, a young coupe. he no longer employed a maid. Inside was the same garden furniture; two garish paintings remained unhung in the nondescript sitting-room.

Warmed by an electric fire, we drank sherry to celebrate our reunion. He was eager to hear about my experiences. I told of the horror of trials held in obscure little village courts from which the families of the defendants were barred, of the trumped-up charges, of Security Police beatings and bribing and schooling of witnesses. he was not surprised to hear that magistrates – one after another – accepted blatantly parroted evidence. Hundreds of men and women who bravely resisted this terrorizing were being sentenced to years of imprisonment for such offences as attending a tea party to raise funds

for the banned African National Congress or Pan Africanist Congress.

I had also attended a rehearsal of Athol Fugard's latest production, *Antigone*. Among men already imprisoned on Robben Island were actors from his black theatre group, Serpent Players. Since Fugard was denied a permit to enter new Brighton township, this rehearsal was surreptitiously held in a coloured kindergarten. The schoolmaster playing Haemon had particularly impressed me, but before opening night he too was arrested and no doubt would soon land up on the island. Nevertheless, the production had gone ahead as though the actors and Fugard were inspired by Antigone's words, 'I honoured those things to which honour truly belongs.'

And I also shared with Bram the moment when Govan Mbeki, whom Bram had defended in the Rivonia trial, arrived at the courthouse in the village of Humansdorp. Handcuffed and flanked by police and armed soldiers, he had been flown in from Robben Island for a trial to give evidence for the defense. After a year of labouring with Nelson Mandela and the other 'lifers' in a lime quarry, he had aged considerably; it seemed to me that weariness had settled on him like fine dust. But as I told Bram, his spirit was as strong as ever: when the magistrate called on the press to withdraw, since it was 'not in the interests of the State' that we should report the evidence of this 'important political prisoner', Govan stood in the witness box, composed and radiating irony.

Later that evening when Bram drove me to a taxi-rank I encouraged him with one further anecdote: a lawyer who regularly visited prisoners awaiting trial told me that the first thing they asked was, 'Is Bram still free?' When assured that he was, they were jubilant.

A few weeks later, on an August day bathed in winter sunshine, we drove along a road straight across the vast breathtaking spaces of the Transvaal, the bare veld which previously I had seen as boring. The glorious day suited our mood. During the past weeks the *Rand Daily*

Mail had published a series of articles on prison conditions, and the Johannesburg *Sunday Times* had followed on with revelations from a white prison warder. Police raided the newspaper offices and interrogated the writers of the articles. Laurence Gandar, editor of the *Mail*, had written increasingly provocative editorials, but the Minister of Justice, Vorster, remained uncharacteristically silent. meanwhile, the Dutch government had made a grant to the fund providing legal aid for political offenders and assistance to their families.

‘Do you think it’s the flaring up of a new flames?’ Bram asked, elated. ‘Or old ashes dying’ / Before I could reply he exclaimed, ‘I believe it is a new flame! If now people could be brought together, a whole new opposition working together. .’ I said that some such activity might already be under way, although I believed the most likely outcome was a penal reform committee of academics and lawyers. But who was I to judge between a last spark and a phoenix?

As Bram turned off the main road in search of a picnic spot, I described my meetings during 1964 with black leaders in Washington and with Martin Luther King in London, when he had been on his way to receive the Nobel Peace Prize – the first signs, I thought, of a genuine black American interest in South Africa. Before long – now it was my turn for euphoria – the black vote would become crucial and, as the US Congress and the Government responded to that pressure, Britain would have to follow suit. Bram was skeptical. His outrage at the news from Vietnam was continually refueled. Some months later however he said he had come round to the view that American blacks had a great potential role in the struggle.

The establishment of a non-racial government in South Africa was what really stirred his imagination. he could envisage the country becoming the industrial supplier for the entire continent. The conflict between white and black would then no longer endanger investments. But we both suspected that the short sight of Western investors and multinationals would prevent their support of economic pressures – taking a temporary loss now rather than losing everything in the future.

We picnicked under a cluster of thorn trees From out of the bush came African women who knelt beside us, showing their handiwork. Bram bought grass mats and seed necklaces. The women quietly withdrew. There was always a slight melancholy when our time for packing-up came.

Bumping over the veld in search of the main road, we returned to our discussion, to Verwoerd's assertion that by 198 the 'tide would be turned' and blacks would be drained from the cities, confined to Bantustans. Bram derided the idea. 'And by 198,' he added, 'Verwoerd will no longer be Prime Minister. Others will reap the terrible whirlwind. We've done all we can to avoid that holocaust — has anyone done more? The last thing communists want is violence. But the Nationalists don't mind shedding blood. After Sharpeville Karel de Wet, a member of the Government, expressed regret that so few had been shot!'

He turned to me for a moment. 'Listen, Mary, the struggle here is not a communist one. The Africans' concern is for the liberation of their people and for a just way of life. They all say, we don't want violence, we hope it won't be inevitable.' He paused. 'No, it *is* the phoenix. I'll never believe we are dying ashes! We are glowing embers that will soon be part of a new flame.'

One evening at the end of August I brought him a gift, German poetry with translations, to mark his seven months of 'freedom'. It was a kind of milestone for me too — I had found that when you do something risky without being caught, each day is an extension of life that you truly value. We had separately seen a local production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Now I wanted to share with him Brecht's poem '*An die Nachgeborenen*' ('To Posterity') which I felt expressed the question Camus put, the most important of our age: How to cease to be victims without becoming executioners?

We walked
Through the wars of the classes, despairing

When there was injustice only and no rebellion.

And yet we know well:
Even hatred of vileness
Distorts a man's features.
Even anger at injustice
Makes hoarse his voice. Ah, we
Who desired to prepare the soil for kindness
Could not ourselves be kind.

But you, when the times permit
Men to be the helpers of men
Remember us
With indulgence.

Was repression inherent in Marxism or was it rather that successful revolutions deteriorated into repression? I had read somewhere the Levellers' appeal to the future Charles II: 'We have lost our way, we looked for Liberty; behold Slavery.' But before I could express such thoughts, Bram had responded by reading from Brecht's *Galileo*:

On our old continent a rumour started: there are new continents! And since our ships have been sailing to them the word has gone round all the laughing continents that the vase dreaded ocean is just a little pond. And a great desire has arisen to fathom the causes of all things: why a stone falls when you drop it, and how it rises when you throw it in the air. Every day something new is discovered. . . And because of that a great wind has arisen, lifting even the gold-embroidered coat-tails of princes and prelates, so that the fat legs and thin legs underneath are seen; legs like our legs. The heavens, it has turned out, are empty. And there is a gale of laughter over that.

'That's how it is,' Bram exclaimed. 'The great wind of socialism, do you see?' He put down the book and stood confronting me. 'Come over to us, Mary! Become a part of something great, be with the people!'

His appeal rang in me. I loved him and I admired him but I could not join him.

During the thirties I was a politically ignorant and racially prejudiced teenager in Pretoria; he was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, alive to the intellectual climate and to events in Europe. On student tours of the continent he witnessed Nazism and Fascism at first hand. The Italian invasion of Ethiopia, hunger strikes in England – these too had been part of the realities of his world. He had returned to South Africa to be confronted by the Greyshirts under Oswald Pirow, Minister of Justice. Only the Communist Party militantly opposed the spread of Fascism abroad and at home, regardless of the risks. Only communists were prepared to work alongside blacks and demand 'one man one vote'. Bram joined the Party, as did Molly and when they became active in the forties, Stalin had been our great ally. During 1946, while I was in Germany working among displaced persons, many of whom had suffered under both Hitler and Stalin, Bram and other communists were assisting African miners in their momentous strike. He had seen the violent suppression of the union by the capitalist Chamber of Mines, aided by Smut's army and police.

Our discussion that night, like those on other occasions, was amicable and animated, with a burst of exasperation now and then. Bram talked of the exploitation of one class by another. I had been with the Four Powers administration of Vienna at the end of the Second World War – 'I saw the way the Russian officers treated their men!' I remonstrated. When Bram patiently explained dialectical materialism, my mind went blank. My arguments were vague. I was influenced then by the ideas of Camus, Lewis Mumford and Simone Weil, and inspired by what I had seen of the human spirit, its capacity for transformation and transcendence.

Bram mentioned that he was studying the methods of the Portuguese Communist Party's underground: it was necessary, he said, to be ruthless even with your own family. But I knew he was quite incapable of ruthlessness: he was taking the considerable risk of

regularly meeting his daughter, Ilse. To my surprise he added that he had been reading the Bible: how much love there was in it, and goodness; qualities inherent in communist ideals. (It later transpired that he used it as code in letters sent overseas.) In South Africa, he pointed out, communists had always tried to work with Christians – with Michael Scott, for instance, and Bishop Reeves. For him Marxism was the solution to the world’s injustice. The future lay with socialism, and permeating his beliefs, his actions, his very nature was unquenchable optimism.

On a Sunday morning we drove to the north-west, through veld barren and strange under a sickly yellow sky. Again the weather matched the news. Vorster had at last reacted: splashed across the morning’s front pages were reports of Security Police raids on the *Rand Daily Mail*; they had seized the passports of the editor and the chief political reporter and arrested those who had given information about prison conditions.

That October spring was heralded by snow in the mountains and cold rain in the city. On the Rand, one of the perpetually overcrowded trains of black workers crashed. Ninety-one passengers were killed. Survivors battered to death a white man coming to their aid.

FISCHER SEEN ON KAUNDA’S FARM.
FISCHER NOT HERE – KAUNDA.

On the wind that swept away the clouds came a host of yellow and white butterflies. Green shoots sprang in the veld. in a *kloof* below a high rocky *krans* Bram and I spread our rugs and cushions under blossoming trees. Kingfishers plunged towards a stream. We gathered wood for our *braai* fire.

Lunch over, I read to Bram from the final chapter of my history of the African struggle. ‘Laski once wrote, “The political criminals under a tyrant are the heroes of all free men.”’ I broke off. ‘That’s a good

quote, hey?' He smiled his agreement. As I read on, shouts came from the woods on the opposite bank and from downstream.

'Your scarf!' he urged. The shouts sounded nearer and nearer. I quickly tied the scarf under my chin, and as helmeted heads appeared among bushes across the stream, Bram calmly offered me a banana. Voices now came from behind us. We turned to see soldiers in full battledress running towards us. This is it, I thought.

'*Gooie dag!*' called one brightly.

'*Dag,*' said Bram.

'*Dag,*' a second soldier and I said, as they trotted on by. We watched their booted feet begin to climb the almost vertical cliff. More shouts and more men running past. We were in the middle of army training manoeuvres!

With studied leisure we packed the picnic basket and rugs and drove up the track to the main road. There a jeep was parked. Three senior officers stared out at us and smilingly saluted as we waved back and speeded away.

A few days later came the inevitable but horrifying news that Vorster had brought back and doubled the ninety-day detention law. One hundred and eighty days of solitary confinement: you had no access to lawyers or courts while the Security Police interrogated you.

A man named Isaac Heymann was the first to be so detained. In prison he attempted suicide. I did not know him but was sure he was one of Bram's contacts. Bram's face was somber when next we met. Yes, he confirmed, Heymann was a close friend. 'Do you know anyone who would put up a fugitive?' he went on to ask. I thought about it.

'No,' I said apologetically, ashamed that I did not want to expose myself or test my friends.

The net was closing in. He confided that he was having sleepless nights. He had assumed a new name, Peter West.

On 2 November came an event he had been dreading: the Judge President of the Transvaal, responding to the application from the Johannesburg Bar Council, ruled that Abram Fischer Q.C. should be struck from the roll of advocates. Bram was bitterly angry. 'Dishonest!' he burst out as soon as I joined him in his car. He had just read the evening paper. 'The Judge President called me dishonest and dishonourable!' He expressed his disillusion and anguish in a torrent of words. For thirty years he had worked hard to uphold the law, had done all a man could to struggle for justice: surely colleagues who had known him well should have the sense, the feeling and courage to understand his reasons for the drastic step he had taken in going underground. 'Why couldn't they let the Government do its own dirty work?' he cried out.

We drove to a suburban hotel. 'Let's have a gin and tonic to cheer ourselves up!' said Bram. We sat on the verandah under a rapidly darkening sky. There was only one other customer, a man at a nearby table. Was he observing us – the tall woman and the short, bearded man? Sensing my unease, Bram said, 'If anyone you know comes up, don't forget to introduce me as Peter West, from out of town.'

'Open your eyes.' We were back at his house. A jacaranda tree was in bloom, glowing phosphorescently in the light from the street. For the rest of the evening we hardly talked, just listened to music.

A few days later the woman who had been my contact with Bram was taken into detention: 180 days. When last I had seen her she said that on some days she felt well and was confident she could cope. But on days when she was feeling ill, she was not so sure. Women detainees were usually made to stand while interrogators questioned and threatened him, made to stand all through the day. . .

Would Bram want to put off our appointment for the coming evening? I telephoned his house from a shop. There was no reply. Knowing the number worried me but it was necessary in case of a change of plan.

Teams of interrogators worked in relays, night and day, banging on the table, 'Wake up!' Threatening to douse her with water. . .

Bram and I met, as arranged. In his house he took me through to a small room where a bed was ready. So this had been for the 'fugitive'. 'It was too late,' he said. And shut the door on the room.

She told the interrogators: 'You are like sadistic schoolboys pulling the legs and wings off a fly.'

Bram was distracted from his grave anxiety for what his friend might be going through only by the desperate need to get away from this house fast. He had found a suitable place, but the owner could not see him to conclude negotiation until the following Sunday.

Her interrogators kept mocking, 'You are going to land in Westkoppies! We will crack you!' (Westkoppies is a Pretoria mental asylum.)

Bram wanted to post an important airmail letter. We drove to the post office. I watched him cross the road in front of a line of cars drawn up at the traffic lights.

Standing, standing, night and day. . . No food. . .

Next morning, the morning of Thursday 11 November, I telephoned Bram. he had asked me to arrange an appointment with a visitor from London and, although I had tried to dissuade him from so risky a venture, he had insisted. 'Your appointment on Saturday,' I told him, 'its all right.' He was delighted.

That evening came news of Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration of Independence. Surely, I thought, Britain would not stand for Ian

Smith's rebellion. This crazy act must help our struggle. I felt suddenly exhilarated, but also sad that the Rhodesian whites could be so deliberately self-destructive. Bram must have seen the newspaper; we would discuss it when we met in a few days' time.

Early next morning an acquaintance called by to collect some photographs. She said, 'Bram Fischer's been caught!'

I did not believe it. There had been many false alarms – how he and I had laughed at them. I began to feel nauseated. She handed me a newspaper:

JO'BURG DRAMA: FISCHER IS ARRESTED

Security Police arrested a heavily-disguised Abram Fischer in a northern suburb of Johannesburg last night.

Brigadier van den Bergh said Fischer was in a car when police, who had been shadowing him, cut off his car and stopped him. The arrest took place very near his old home, and he handed himself over without any trouble.

For 290 days the police have searched far and wide for him in probably the biggest manhunt they have ever undertaken.

Die Transvaaler had a picture of him beside the great bully Swanepoel, the most notorious of all the Security Police, whose fist clutched Bram's arm, while Bram's other hand adjusted the rimless spectacles as he stared into the photographer's flash.

A day of mourning. A day interminable, somehow to be survived. 'You've saved my sanity,' he had said when we parted on that last evening. 'Bless you.'

The semi-detached house was pictured in the press. it was called Mon Repos. A lorry stood outside, stacked with furniture – the garden chairs and table we had joked about. In the foreground was

the mulberry tree from which we had picked leaves for a child's silkworms.

SURGERY HAD CHANGED FISCHER'S FACE. A plastic surgeon, after studying pictures of Fischer, opined that it looked like the work of an expert – probably outside South Africa.

Die Transvaaler assured readers that the police had been watching Fischer's house for a considerable time. Associates and friends who had visited the disguised fugitive would be 'snuffed out'. Clearly the Security Police hoped that we – whoever we were – would scatter and run. But if they had been watching the house, they would have known the telephone number and, overhearing our last conversation a few hours before Bram was captured, they would have waited to discover who he was due to meet on Saturday.

the corridors of the Magistrates Court clattered with uniformed police. Photographers' flash bulbs clicked busily – press or police? Ilse was absent but Ruth and Paul, back from London, were taken to see their father in the cells below the court. They returned, grinning at the list of practical things he had given them to do.

The courtroom bristled with Security Police. A handful of spectators, white on our side, black on theirs, sat in the public galleries. While we waited I counted the police milling round the dock. I had got to forty-nine when up the steps from the cells and into the dock came Bram.

As he stood there he turned once, calmly, deliberately, to look at us, and once to look at the black gallery. he had shaved off the beard and had reverted to his old, half-rimmed spectacles. I felt doubly bereaved.

It took but a few moments for the Magistrate to announce a remand; a glance from Bram at Ruth and Paul and he was gone. A prisoner, to

be held behind bars and locked doors in a cell in Pretoria prison. I was never to see him again.

At his trial early in 1966, largely on the evidence of a black turncoat, Bram Fischer was found guilty of conspiring to commit sabotage with Nelson Mandela and the other men he had defended two years earlier in the Rivonia trial; guilty also of contravening the Suppression of Communism Act and of forging documents with assumed names. he made a statement from the dock in the course of which he said: 'There is a strong and ever-growing movement for freedom and for basic human rights amongst the non-white people of the country – that is, amongst four-fifths of the population. This movement is supported not only by the whole of Africa but by virtually the whole membership of the United Nations as well – both West and East.

'However complacent and indifferent white South Africa may be, this movement can never be stopped. In the end it must triumph. Above all, those of us who are Afrikaans and who have experienced our own successful struggle for full equality should I know this.

'The sole questions for the future of all of us, therefore, are not whether the change will come but only whether the change can be brought about peacefully and without bloodshed, and what the position of the white man is going to be in the period immediately following on the establishment of democracy – after the years of cruel discrimination and oppression and humiliation which he has imposed on the non-white peoples of this country. . .

'It is true that apartheid has existed for many decades. . . What is not appreciated by my fellow Afrikaners, because he has cut himself off from all contact with non-whites, is that the extreme intensification of that policy over the past fifteen years is laid entirely at his door. he is now blamed as an Afrikaner for all the evils and humiliations of apartheid. . .

'All this bodes ill for our future. It has bred a deep-rooted hatred for Afrikaners, for our language, our political and racial outlook amongst all non-whites – yes, even amongst those who seek positions of authority by pretending to support apartheid. It is rapidly destroying amongst non-whites all belief in future co-operation with Afrikaners.

'To remove this barrier will demand all the wisdom, leadership and influence of those Congress leaders now sentenced and imprisoned for their political beliefs. It demands also that Afrikaners themselves should protest openly and clearly against discrimination. Surely, in such circumstances, there was an additional duty cast on me, that at least one Afrikaner should make this protest actively and positively even though as a result I faced fifteen charges instead of four.'

'It was to keep faith with all those dispossessed by apartheid that I broke my undertaking to the courts, separated myself from my family, pretended I was someone else, and accepted the life of a fugitive. I owed it to the political prisoners, to the banished, to the silenced and those under house arrest, not to remain a spectator, but to act. . .

'All the conduct with which I have been charged has been directed towards maintaining contact and understanding between the races of this country. If one day it may help to establish a bridge across which white leaders and the real leaders of the non-whites can meet, to settle the destinies of all of us by negotiations and not by force of arms, I shall be able to bear with fortitude any sentence which this court may impose on me.'

He was sentenced to imprisonment for life.

The two women who had been his contacts were each sentenced to two years' imprisonment.

He has concluded by quoting President Kruger, the Boer leader – 'prophetic words,' Bram said, 'when spoken in 1881,' and words which remained prophetic: "'With faith we lay our whole case bare to

the world. Whether we win, whether we die, freedom shall rise over Africa as the sun out of the morning clouds.”

‘I tried very hard,’ Bram wrote to me, ‘to reach my fellow Afrikaners, but that does not seem to have worked.’

I remember once saying to Bram that he was a source of strength. He was silent for a moment, then rounded on me as ‘a silly ass!’

He was really cross. ‘It was Molly who gave strength,’ he exclaimed. ‘Molly, not I!’

During his fifth year in prison his son, aged twenty-three, died suddenly. One of Bram’s brothers came to the prison to break the news. They stood, divided by a partition, two wardens behind each of them. Bram was told that Paul had died that morning. Afterwards he was taken directly to his cell and locked in for the night. Not until the next morning did his fellow-prisoners hear the news. he had been fourteen hours alone with the knowledge of Paul’s death. He was not permitted to attend the funeral.

In 1968 I was allowed back to South Africa briefly to be with my dying father in Pretoria. I applied to visit Bram. The Commissioner of Prisons was a man of few words: ‘Your request to visit A. Fischer cannot be acceded to.’ But we were able to exchange occasional letters. he was not, however, allowed to receive my letter about Paul’s death as his quota had already been filled; nor was his daughter allowed to tell him what I had said about how I had come to know and love Paul, with his passion for jazz and his mocking sense of humour.

The closest Bram could get to mentioning politics was a paragraph in his cheerful reply of 29 September 1974 to my letter from the desert:

Striking was the contrast you created for me.
Nevada/Berkeley/New England's misty coast. . . I'm sure
Americans are extremely well-meaning, I've never met one
who didn't appear so. Problem is, do they sufficiently
understand what's going on, sufficiently to match up to their
responsibilities in the next decade or two? I believe those
responsibilities will be enormous, their performance may save
or sacrifice millions of lives, by famine even.

For the most part he described his studies – he had passed Economics I and was reading 'Native Administration' – and the plants he was growing in the courtyard of their special section: gazanias and roses, Iceland poppies and freesias. he was experimenting with grafting guava and grenadilla; if it bore fruit he would name it guavadilla. He fed crumbs to sparrows, doves and rock-pigeons. 'Then we have a thrush coming after worms occasionally and can sometimes hear a Cape Robin before dawn.'

'Of course I remember the Trafalgar starlings,' he replied to an inquiry. 'When you see our host again, please give my regards.' This was a reference to an evening we spent with Hugh Caradon in his apartment overlooking the birds' shrill nightly invasion of Trafalgar Square. 'Also remember picnics,' he added – his turn now to test my memory. 'The famous one where we watched youngsters practicing crossing rivers, climbing crags.'

'Seven lines left,' he concluded, 'to serve for Xmas greetings, for I shall have to keep some months for family obligations. Celebrate happily.'

That Christmas he was in the Verwoerd Hospital, guarded by two wardens. After a fall in prison, cancer had been discovered. Throughout his dreadful, slow dying he was said to be calm and cheerful, but exhausted. Despite the repeated appeals of family, friends and innumerable people from many countries, the Minister of Prisons and Justice refused to release him to the care of his family until he was incapable of appreciating their companionship.

Bram Fischer died on 8 May 1975. After the funeral, the authorities demanded that his ashes be returned to Pretoria prison.

Source: *Granta*, no. 19, 1986.