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ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENT

BLACKSASH

1955 ~ 1995

Cartoon: Donald Kenyon, Daily Dispatch, 12 May 1970.

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Black Sash Archives

Forty years ~ a celebration

Looking backwards, looking forwards,
***Jo MacRobert** tells the story of the Black Sash.*

The beginning 1955 – 58

"We are women who sacrifice individual pleasure, comfort, time and money in order that justice may prevail and that there may be honesty and justice in public life"

Ruth Foley, first Black Sash National Conference, Bloemfontein, 1956.

Jenny de Tolly, former Black Sash president, once described the origins of the organisation thus: "Six women each phoned six women, who each phoned six other women, and they got a movement going that was about defending what was right and condemning what was wrong."

To these founding Black Sash mothers, right was enshrined in the entrenched clauses of the Union constitution and the Westminster system of parliamentary government; wrong was the concerted attack that the Nationalist government had launched on these principles since the 1948 election.

In May 1955, the particular wrong that incensed them was the legislation before parliament which planned to load the Senate with government supporters. It was the campaign to protest against the Senate Bill that, within a few short months, had mobilised about 20 000 white women throughout the country to join the Women's League for the Defence of the Constitution and wear its emblem, the Black Sash. Hence emerged the organisation that was to become known nationally and internationally as the Black Sash.

The 1955 world into which the organisation was born was very different from that of today. Memories of the war against fascism in Europe and Japan were still fresh. Black Sash cries of "dictatorship" were a call to action for many of the women who joined the movement. Many of them had seen war service and had husbands who had not that long before returned from the front. On the other hand, the Cold War climate induced in them a fear of socialism and deep-seated suspicions of left-wing individuals and organisations. The hand of friendship that was extended to the Black Sash by the Federation of South African Women was rejected and, later, membership of the Black Sash was refused to several women who had been members of the Communist Party and the Congress of Democrats.

One wonders how the history of the Black Sash would have been written if the organisation had not taken the conservative decision in those early days to restrict membership to white female voters who had to be resident in South Africa.

New venture 1958 – 62

"The Black Sash will now turn its face towards the future and work more constructively for the new South Africa which must surely emerge."

Black Sash Special National Conference, July 1958.

Within South Africa, the foundation stones of the apartheid state were being laid down one by one, yet it was not until 1958 that the Black Sash began to see apartheid and racial oppression as a moral wrong in the same way that it abhorred the tampering with the constitution. Black Sash membership had slumped after the 1958 election defeat of the United Party, political home for the majority of Black Sash members, and the organisation had to regroup, refocus and find a new vision. Led by women of sharp political acumen, who had established independent links across the colour line, the organisation took the first tentative steps towards redefining its role as a catalyst for social change.

This was reflected in the establishment of the Bail Fund Office in Athlone, Cape Town, in 1958, precursor of the Athlone Advice Office (1962) and the Johannesburg Advice Office (1963). The Black Sash also joined the campaign against the notorious farm labour scheme, which the Transvaal Black Sash helped to have declared *ultra vires* in 1959.

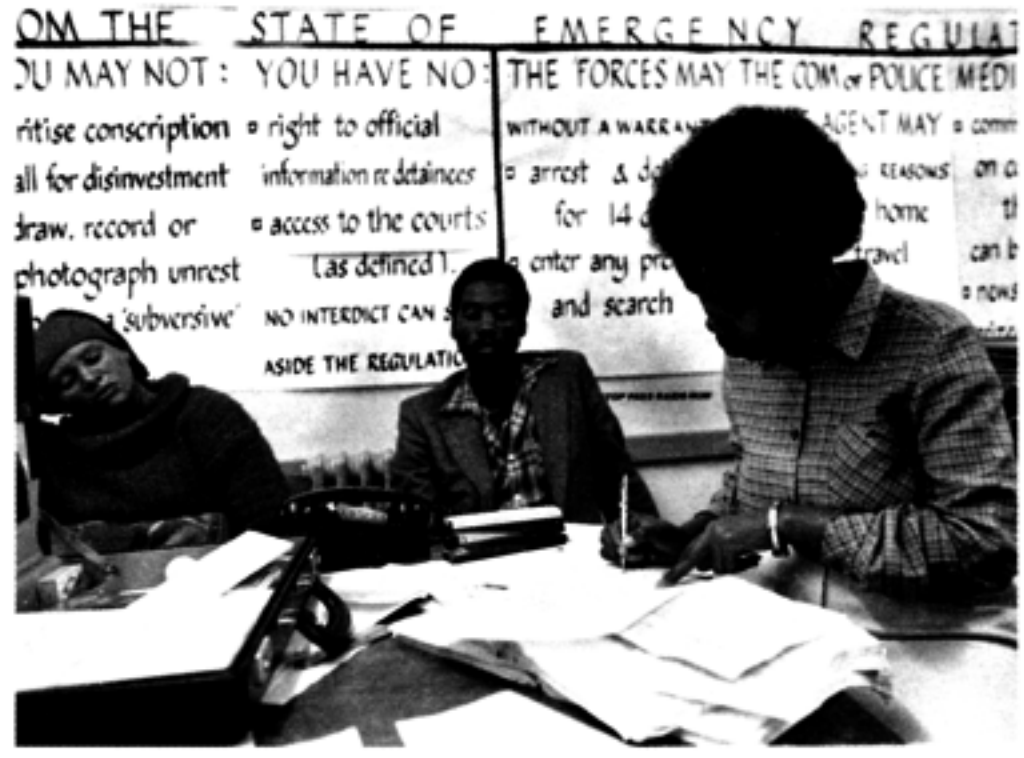
Difficult decades 1962 – 82

"We are groping in the semidark and the flame of freedom is flickering."

Former Black Sash president Jean Sinclair, 1966.

The structures and policies which the Black Sash had evolved by 1962 remained largely unchanged until the 1980s. The hallmarks of the organisation were: a national membership which hovered under the 2 000 mark, concentrated in the main urban areas; strong national leadership by successive presidents Jean Sinclair, Sheena Duncan and Joyce Harris from the Johannesburg headquarters; annual national conferences where policy was decided by, and contributions came largely from, white participants; Advice Offices in the urban areas which aimed at ameliorating the effects of the pass and influx control laws in particular; a vociferous role in protesting against the increasingly oppressive machinery of state; and a slow emergence as a human and civil rights watchdog.

The 1960s and 70s were very difficult years for the Black Sash. White South Africa had retreated into political conservatism, internal opposition had been effectively silenced and the nation had withdrawn from the international community into isolation at the tip of Africa. It required courage and endurance not only to survive, but to keep alive the spirit of dissent.



Gille

The Johannesburg Advice Office.

The Black Sash protested against each crackdown on freedom — the 90 and 180-day detention laws, the Sabotage Act, Terrorism Act, Bureau of State Security Act, Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act, Riotous Assemblies Act, Internal Security Act. Between 1963 and 1983, the Black Sash mourned the deaths in detention of 53 people, including Imam Haron, Steve Biko, Neil Aggett and two unknown detainees — who remain unnamed — whose deaths were only reported after questions were asked in parliament.

Simultaneously, the Black Sash monitored and spoke out against the forced removals from proclaimed Group Areas and "black spots" and helped to draw the attention of the nation and the world to the horrors of the resettlement camps at Sada, Dimbaza, Illinge, Limehill, Morsgat, Stinkwater and elsewhere.

Quick to foresee the disastrous consequences of so-called "homeland independence", the Black Sash rejected the creation of states in the Transkei, Venda, Bophuthatswana and Ciskei whose new "citizens", having lost all rights in South Africa, were hounded from townships, squatter camps and rural areas in "white" South Africa.

The queues at the Advice Offices grew ever longer as loopholes in influx control laws were closed, and as the socio-economic consequences of the migrant, contract labour system took their toll on the African population. Indeed, the role of the Advice Offices throughout this time cannot be underestimated, for it was within their cramped and ill-furnished rooms that the Black Sash heard the stories of the dispossessed people of South Africa and developed a deep and unequivocal understanding of the harsh realities of the apartheid state. The daily interface at the

Eric Miller

Tumultous years: The Black Sash protest in support of other organisations in June 1989.

Advice Offices throughout these very dark years informed the Black Sash, offered it new directions, and, most importantly, earned the movement an acceptance within the black community which few other white organisations had managed to achieve.

Tumultuous years 1983 – 90

"We keep banging our heads against a brick wall, hoping for a miracle."

Noël Robb, 1989.

The harsh political climate of the 1960s and 70s toughened the Black Sash and gave it a resilience which proved invaluable in the 1980s when South Africa was gripped by a siege mentality and there was a real danger of a rightwing military coup. From 1985 to 1990 the country was placed under successive states of emergency in which the rule of the securocrats reached its zenith.

The Black Sash drew on all the skills it had developed in its 30 years of existence to monitor and speak out against mass arrests, disappearances of activists, brutal assassinations, the increasing militarisation of society, the actions of the *kitskonstabels* and vigilantes.

In Natal, and in certain urban townships, feuding between rival black groups reached the scale of civil war. Taxi wars broke out, introducing a new threat to communities who had already suffered so much.

Perhaps if the Black Sash had had to face this total onslaught on its own, from the lonely position it had occupied in previous decades, the burden might have been too great. But if there was one redeeming feature of the 1980s it was the growth of a mass-based resistance movement within the country which invited the Black Sash, on the basis of the organisation's hard-earned credentials, to join it.

And so it was that Black Sash women flew their banners at mass rallies, at marches, at UDF meetings, at the conferences of the End Conscription Campaign, Free The Children Alliance, Five Freedoms Forum and, all too sadly, at funerals — of the Cradock Four, of Johannes Spogter in Steytlerville, in Uitenhage after the Langa massacre.

These dynamic partnerships with community-based organisations injected vitality and energy into the Black Sash. Membership rose, the organisation received international recognition as never before, funding for the Advice Offices was secured.

Black Sash national conferences were enlivened by the participation of speakers from community organisations and from the rural areas. Slowly the organisation moved away from its traditional white, urban base. The changes that took place within the Black Sash at this time were reflected, literally and metaphorically, in its switch from twinsets and pearls to jeans and T-shirts.

More challenges 1990 – 94

"I salute the women of the Black Sash."

Nelson Mandela, Cape Town, Sunday 11 February 1990.

The miracle that Noël Robb had referred to, and that all Black Sash members had been waiting for, took place in February 1990. With the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and the unbanning of the African National Congress and other political organisations, "perestroika" replaced "total onslaught" and the country moved — anxiously, haltingly — towards an interim constitution, a bill of rights and the April 1994 general election. It was not only in Berlin that walls were crumbling.

The Black Sash was involved in every step of this process. Black Sash memoranda were submitted to committees entrusted with drawing up the interim constitution and the bill of rights; Black Sash voter education programmes were used nationwide; members monitored the election campaign and, during the election, Black Sash women were placed in positions of authority at voting stations. In a sense the Black Sash came into its own in these years of change and finally began to harvest some of the seeds sown long ago in the bleak 1960s.

The future

"We inhabit a new space. It is incumbent upon us to guard new rights and entrench hardwon democracy ... Civil society is not of itself democratic."

Editorial, *SASH*, September 1994.

The election of a new government in 1994, exhilarating though it was, did not mean that a new state of nirvana was created. The sins and wickedness of the previous era have left deep wounds on the nation. Everywhere are the signs of former neglect and maladministration - in education, health, housing, transport and communications, the economy and the environment. Corruption and cover-ups are rife. There is, as yet, no system of post-apartheid local government in place. The final constitution has still to be written. Press freedom is threatened by company monopolies. Racial and gender discrimination are daily experiences. And — perhaps the most glaring of all these ills — we live in one of the most violent societies on earth.

In the post-election period, one episode in particular stands out not only as testimony to the organisation's role in the new South Africa, but also serves to encapsulate both its 40-year history and its future.

In February 1995, Black Sash national president Mary Burton made a submission to the parliamentary Justice Committee. Standing in the old assembly chamber, the very place where previous government leaders had attacked the Black Sash, she read a list of names of those who had died in detention during the horrendous years of apartheid, and she asserted that those responsible for their deaths should be brought to justice.

This moment was filled with irony and symbolism. On the one hand it revealed the extent of the changes that have occurred since 1955. On the other hand, the sight of a member of the Black Sash — composed, strong, determined, knowledgeable — accompanied by fellow members of the Black Sash, standing before government members and demanding that justice be done, insisting that right is right and wrong is wrong, was a powerful statement about the interrelationships between the state, society and organisations like the Black Sash.

It confirmed that the Black Sash can celebrate its 40th year with pride, but with the conviction that its concerns will never be over. Challenge and change, the forces that have driven the Black Sash since 1955, still propel the organisation. The Black Sash now moves into the new era and enters its new role as an advice office-centred, human rights agency.

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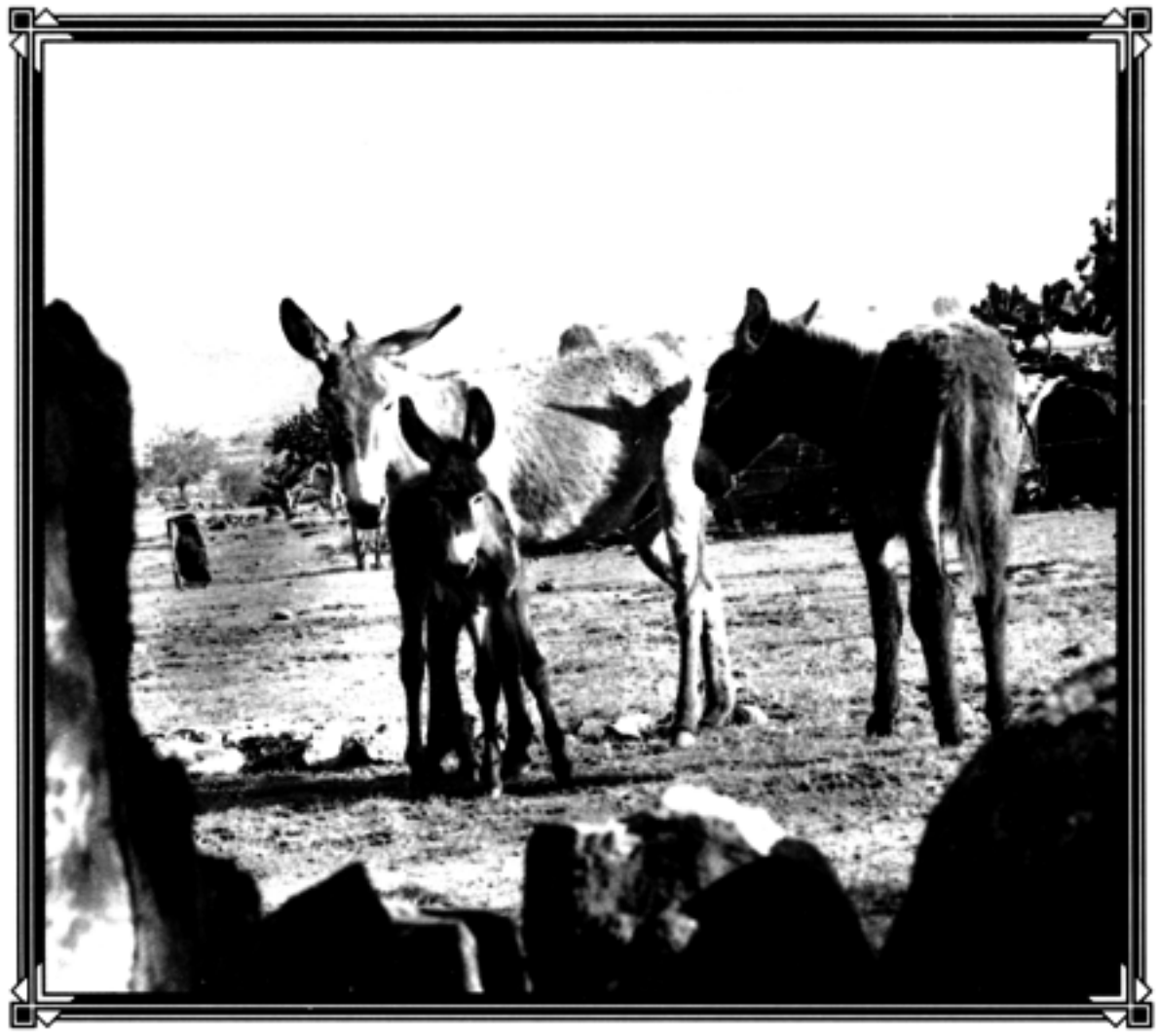
Jo MacRobert is a member of the Cape Western Black Sash.

Gille



Gille: The donkeys at Mogopa

Turn left at the donkeys

Remembering routes travelled, embarking as hopeful travellers on the road ahead.

One day in January 1986 we received a phone call from a man living on the farm Vlakfontein, south of Johannesburg. "Come quickly," he said. "The Black Sash must come quickly. They're breaking the houses."

We asked his name and where the demolitions were happening. Very agitated he told us, in broken English, that they were living near the aeroplane. Near Jan Smuts Airport or Grand Central Airport in the north, we asked. "No, no," he insisted, they were near the aeroplane "flying on the roof". We recalled the old Dakota that since World War Two has lain derelict on top of a garage near what is now Devland. "Yes," he said. "You must go up the road, over the river, count over three mountains (!), and then turn left at the donkeys!"

We said we would try to find the place. We knew the general direction and the surrounding area, but we had never seen "mountains" in Johannesburg. However, once we had assumed our caller's perceptions, the aeroplane was indeed flying on the roof, there are mountains if you are on foot, and, beside the donkeys, we found the caller standing in the middle of the dirt road, waving his arms.

Postscript: A committee was formed at Vlakfontein which became one of the strongest anti-eviction groups in the region. It organised around the demand for a place to stay and the settlement grew to about 1 500 dwellings. Unfortunately, in the violence between 1990 and 1994 a number of people in the community were killed, including the man and members of his committee who had organised the first group who had stayed there.

Josie Adler

Invisible servant

A Cape Western Advice Office client's wife had been arrested in the raids on KTC squatters. The Manenberg police had thrice denied that she and her young baby were in the cells and our client was desperate. So Molly Blackburn and I did a "white madam" thing. We took the man to the shops to stock up on milk and Pronutro which we then insisted we deliver personally to the women who had been arrested. The client carried the parcels behind us as we entered the cells and no one even noticed him — the invisible servant. He was able to see his wife and baby and while he was there he took messages for other husbands, friends and family who were looking for their loved ones.

Di Oliver

Flying start

Once I had to take Senator Edward Kennedy to Mathopestad. This entailed flying by helicopter, first to meet his aides, and then on to "sun city" — a resettlement camp in the veld near Pilanesberg comprising hundreds of tin toilets, which was planned for the Mathopestad tribe.

On the day Kennedy arrived in Mathopestad, with a press entourage second to none, and delivered his speech of commiseration. The chief stood up and began his response, but after five minutes Kennedy cut him

short and said he had to leave! It was scandalous — although the publicity benefitted the tribe. Kennedy then climbed into his helicopter, but it would not start. He grew very agitated and left in a rush by car.

By this time the whole village had surrounded this limp metallic bird, which had what the pilot diagnosed as a flat battery. Then a wise old man of the village jumped on his bike and disappeared, returning in a wonderful old Ford truck with which he jump-started the helicopter! The crowd cheered, and I got a ceremonious ferry back to Johannesburg in the rejuvenated helicopter. The community indeed won the day and, in the long run, their battle!

Marj Brown

Grave case

The East London Advice Office has heard all sorts of cases over the years, but possibly none quite like the one heard by Hildur Amato. Having listened to a client ranting on about the horrors of his wife for an hour, she asked him to bring his wife to the office, hoping to be able to mediate. His response: "Oh, but I can't. I have just killed her."

Susie Power

Washed out

The repression of the 1980s was particularly severe in the Eastern Cape. Five members of Albany Black Sash were detained, our fieldworker, Janet Small, Priscilla Hall, Louise Vale, Anne Burroughs and Melissa de Villiers. The scourge of the Black Sash in those days was security policeman Lloyd Edwards, ironically once the lover of our chairperson, Anne Burroughs, before he'd been unmasked.

Edwards remains a legend in Grahamstown, and his notoriety in part stems from a story that gave everyone great pleasure and inspired courage at the time. While Louise Vale was in detention, her husband, Peter, found himself in the same pub as Edwards one evening. Arming himself with a full tankard, Peter strolled across the room and poured the entire contents over the head of the surprised policeman. Almost immediately — and utterly indelibly — bold graffiti appeared in the OK Bazaar's parking lot: "Down a Lloyd; feel satisfied!" Everyone shared Peter's satisfaction.

Rosie Smith, Lynette Paterson, Gus Macdonald

Thoughts from inside

The atmosphere of those days is poignantly preserved in scraps of paper that still survive! The following extracts from a letter smuggled from Janet Small to Rosie Smith bear witness not only to the nature of the times, but also to the character of our fieldworker, and the quality of Black Sash woman generally:

"I hope the Sash work is going ahead in strength. I must apologise for leaving the office in such a state! I really should have put more effort into explaining to others my office system and area contacts. Let this be a lesson to us all: we must be more systematic in this regard ...

"I feel very anxious about the Sash money being spent on my salary. I deeply appreciate your support, but I think you should consider at least reducing my salary. I suggest this matter be discussed in general in the Sash: how to cope with detention of employees ... I'm rather pleased to be missing the worst of the Grahamstown winter; you know, despite the bare, cold cell, PE has a much milder climate. I pity the prisoners in Waainek (Grahamstown's prison) ...

"Looking at the bright side, I think a restriction order from (Sash activities) may be a blessing for me. Imagine the culture shock of walking out of solitary confinement into an exuberant Sash meeting! I'm sure I'd be overcome. On a more serious note, please don't feel too anxious about me — it is very good to experience the reality after all those years of working with ex-detainees. That work prepared me, but somehow it is different to what I'd expected. Not worse, different. My heart goes out to those who have been inside for years. May they have strength to continue.

"I'm sure I'll be seeing you all soon. Struggle on, Sashers!"

Janet's fear of the Black Sash's exuberance was not unfounded; every time one of our members was released, a great party erupted!

Rosie Smith, Lynette Paterson, Gus Macdonald

A makeshift rural advice clinic in the boot of a Black Sash member's car.

Gille

Ten years later

The funeral of our dear comrades from Cradock, Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkonto and Sicelo Mhlawuli, was a painful and unforgettable experience, but I think for those of us who were

there it was an experience that strengthened our resolve.

My sister, Molly Blackburn, and I arrived in the evening, happy to see other Black Sashers who were coming in from all over the country. We barely slept that night, but went in Brian and Di Bishop's Kombi into Lingelihle township to pray with the men's widows and to show solidarity at the various halls where people were gathering.

Next morning the wonderful Black Sash banner came out and we marched from Michausdal township, where the Catholic convent had sheltered us, to Lingelihle. As we marched the coloured community joined us and we moved across the national road some hundreds strong — with the casspirs and hippos massed on the overlooking hills. At the stadium two young comrades insisted on carrying our banner and we were requested to do a "march of honour" round the stadium, to much cheering. We were surprised to see the red flag bearing the hammer and sickle of the South African Communist Party and made very sure our own banner was the backdrop for press photographs of us Black Sashers.

I remember some of the speakers: Bishop Bruce Evans, Beyers Naude, Victoria Mxenge — brave South Africans not afraid to voice their outrage at the assassination of these fine men. I remember seeing Janet Cherry there, just released from her first spell in detention. I remember the grief of the widows and the bewilderment of their children. It was a still, Karoo winter day, and I remember the dust rising in the air as thousands of mourners filed past the open graves, tossing handfuls of soil onto the coffins. And I remember the news, late that night, that a National State of Emergency had been declared and many of our friends had been detained.

It is almost 10 years since that funeral. We must not forget why we were there on that day, nor the cause for which they and many others laid down their lives.

Judy Chalmers

Marching under the Black Sash banner at the funeral of four Cradock comrades, July 1985.

Links with the sun

MmaBaard, one of four women who led the 20 000 women to the Union Buildings on 9 August 1956, was guest of honour at our coming of age celebration. Sheena Duncan, always a favourite, was there to help celebrate our constitution as the newest Black Sash region.

Many images of bravery and dedication linger long in the mind and memories of Black Sash in Pretoria — the detention and deportation of Annike van Gylswyk; a proud track record in detainee, prisoners and trialists' support work; an Advice Office held in high esteem in the broader community; our contribution to the Open Pretoria initiative. But the work which encapsulates the character of the region must be our overwhelming commitment to the abolition of the death penalty.

There are some on death row for whom Black Sash members are their reality, their links with the sun. Some are personally visited; others know that outsiders care because the Black Sash sends them Christmas cards and has contact with their families.

Our lobbying has earned us both respect and burn-out. We have co-ordinated the abolition work nationally in the Black Sash for the past two years, and we watch Judge Chaskelson and his colleagues with a mixture of fear and expectation.

If only ... and then our cause for celebrating the 40 years of the Black Sash will magnify a hundred-fold.

Kerry Harris

Dance of praise

After speaking to one of the local communities about their forced incorporation into Bophuthatswana, the residents had lined up to sign a petition in protest. While they were earnestly taking turns to sign, a woman decided to transform the event into a celebration.

Gille

As each woman signed, she would gracefully sway to and fro between the two queues, holding aloft a scarf or shawl and humming a tune. As they signed more and more of her sisters joined her, and the people celebrated their act of standing up for their rights with a swirling, graceful dance of colourful scarves.

Marj Brown

Gille

Dance of praise: After signing the petition in Bophuthatswana.

Legal memories

Mary Coke, who for so long monitored cases in the Langa court, can be remembered as she stood straight and tall in all her dignity in a prefab court in Wynberg, surrounded by Black Sash regional councillors, defending herself against a charge of being illegally in a black township.

● Dot Cleminshaw, after being found guilty of being in possession of banned literature, in the Parow magistrates' court, refused to pay a fine. The magistrate was completely thrown, but eventually after much conferring sent her on her way to Pollsmoor. Her Black Sash friends watched her disappear down the steps.

● A police van driving in Langa early one morning stopped briefly. A woman called through the mesh, giving her name, my name and telephone number. David Viti on his way to the Advice Office miraculously picked up the desperate message and handed it on.

● Appearing in the Langa court conveyor belt legal system one morning were two staff members from the Hout Bay Hotel. One was the chef in his full white uniform and high hat, and the other a waitress in her petticoat.

Joan Grover

Speaking out

One of Albany Black Sash's chairpersons in the 1960s was Doreen Kelly, a ramrod-straight lady with a piercing intelligence, impeccable command of the English language and a self-discipline that remained an example to us all right to the end of her life.

When our minute books were confiscated during a security police raid, it was Doreen who led a group of behatted and begloved Sash women to retrieve our belongings. In those days the security branch was veiled in mystery, and we had only a vague idea of their whereabouts. But Doreen ferreted them out and rapped on the iron door. A startled constable let them in and Mrs Kelly, in stentorian tones, demanded the Sash records.

"But Ma'am", blustered the constable, "we have done nothing wrong!"

Came Doreen Kelly's sharp reply: "Wrong! I should hope not. You are the police!"

Needless to say we soon had our confiscated material back!

Rosie Smith, Lynette Paterson, Gus Macdonald

Hats off!

Sometime in the 1960s I was invited to speak to a general meeting about the plight of African leaders who had been banished. I decided to wear a hat and gloves as befitted the Black Sash, or so I thought at the time. Apparently this caused some mirth, for the Black Sash had already become more relaxed in its dress code.

I had been working with Helen Joseph and others on the Human Rights Welfare Committee to campaign against banishment without trial. One day Peggy Roberts confronted me with the question, "but aren't they all communists?" I was indignant and said I didn't care if they were Stalin's uncles, the principle at stake was draconian punishment without recourse to the courts. She sighed in agreement, then said, "just the same, I think the Black Sash should concentrate its campaigns against the pass laws because they affect the generality of Africans". I thought the Black Sash could do both, which eventually of course it did.

I came to greatly admire the brilliant and beautiful Peggy Roberts for those qualities (of intellectual, spiritual and often physical loveliness) possessed also by many of the other Black Sash members I came to know — like Mary Birt, Mary Stoy, Barbara Grieve, to mention only a few of those now dead. And of course there are the many more still alive.

Dot Cleminshaw

Helen returns

After influx control was abolished in 1986 the SAP station commander at De Deur, in the south of Johannesburg, (where Barend Strydom had been employed), was overheard saying that he would continue arresting squatters every night until the Black Sash couldn't find another lawyer left in Johannesburg to defend them. In 1987 he very nearly did that. Between March and November nearly 800 cases were heard; there was not a single conviction.

When the phone calls came, from all over the place, at any time of the night, we would take the names of those arrested and the places, find someone to appear in court on their behalf at 8 am and bail would be fixed. One Friday evening there was a call from people in the nearby settlement. About 50 people who should have been released on bail by that afternoon had still not come home. The lawyer, phoning from home, had a healthy row with the officer-in-charge, but that got him nowhere. He was told, "you and the plakkers are all ANC terrorists". Two of us then drove the 45km to the police station.

We entered to find the constables playing games throwing pens, pencils, rulers and rubbers against the

ceiling and walls. When they saw us they all started to attention and immediately shuffled into a line. Papers were hastily ordered, and someone came forward to quickly ask, "kan ek u help?". We asked about the men who should have been released and were assured they had all had gone about an hour ago. Did we want to see the books, which were all quickly exhibited on the counter in front of us? Not really, that was not our business.

We left, puzzled by the unaccustomed reception. Later the squatters told us that they had been asked by the police, "hoekom het julle plakkers Helen Suzman geroep om julle uit die stasie te spring?". They had mistaken the grey-haired Sash member for "die ou auntie Helen".

Josie Adler

Tea and protest

The very first protest I took part in as a new member of the Black Sash was relatively low key. We had spent several evenings printing enormous banners giving variations on the theme "charge or release". Then on the Saturday morning we drove down to the Eastern Beach in East London where we all parked in a row along the beachfront, draped the banners over the back of our cars and went to the tearoom on the other side of the road where we treated ourselves to tea and cream scones while all the passersby took in our very effective message.

I remember this occasion very well, not only because it was my first protest, but because it was the first time I met Miss Nancy Little who had come along as a passenger to lend moral support. At that time Miss Little was 96 years old and still committed to the ideals and work of the Black Sash. I remember thinking that this must be a very special organisation if a woman of that age could still feel so passionately about it. And of course it was! (Miss Little died at the age of 104, still a Black Sash member.)

Two or her friends, Miss Bruton and Miss Eales, were always prepared to stand, even though they had to be helped up the steps of the City Hall. In their felt hats, their long dark coats, leaning on their walking sticks, I was always convinced that they were the original models for the grandmother in the Giles cartoons.

But surely one of the most courageous members we ever had was Miss Whittaker. As a nurse in Aden after World War Two, she uncovered a fraudulent scheme involving the theft of drugs. In retaliation a young Arab was paid to throw acid in her face and she was blinded. She returned to East London to be with her family — and joined the Black Sash, taking part in all the protest stands. When I think of how scared so many people were to stand up in front of the City Hall, subject to people's abuse and worse — on one occasion a bottle of ink was thrown at a protestor — it is amazing to think that someone who was no longer young and totally blind would be willing to do this. These four and many other marvellous women were the ones who had experienced life under the rule of law and held strong to that memory. They carried us through the dark days and we will always be grateful to them.

Val Viljoen

Prayer and memory

Nancy Charton was once at the head of a very diverse group of people marching up to the township to attend one of the inevitable funerals at that time. Along the road they encountered buffels and bullies blocking their way and it became clear that they were not going to be allowed to pass.

"Right!" cried Nancy to her very mixed congregation. "Let us pray!" And there in the street Christians and communists alike joined in prayers for peace and justice, to the acute embarrassment of the soldiers who faced them. (Nancy Charton later became the first woman to be ordained as a priest in the Anglican Church in South Africa.)

Rosie Smith, Lynette Paterson, Gus Macdonald

Providing for all

The Black Sash in East London was always a very small, easily identifiable group of women whom the security police delighted in tormenting. They were the most regular attenders of all our activities where they would slash members' tyres (preferably two at a time to make it difficult to get home). They attended every stand and would pounce on the smallest transgression. They sent us flowers, party orders of alcohol, coffins (all to be charged to our own accounts) and phoned us at all hours of the day and night. But they finally dreamt up a scheme that they felt sure would discredit us in the eyes of the black community.

In April 1989 they printed thousands of pamphlets which they distributed throughout the black townships surrounding East London advertising a Black Sash Winter Care Programme where anyone in need should present themselves that night at the local chairperson's house where they would get everything from food to shelter, jobs and clothes. At 6 pm that night hundreds of destitute people, who had come from miles around, arrived at Sue Power's house hoping to find their problems solved.

Border Black Sash members leapt into action, producing mountains of sandwiches and soup and trying to explain to the people that they had been the subject of the latest police hoax. The resultant publicity produced an unexpected response from the East London community who donated so much food, clothing, and housing materials that they were almost able to meet the promises made by the police!

Susie Power

There to witness

In August 1984 the news got around that trucks and casspirs were going at dawn almost every day to destroy the plastic shelters at KTC (between Guguletu and Nyanga) and cart the materials away. Mary Burton and I decided to see for ourselves and drove out in the dark to be there in time. A track led to a low hill where we found a lonely watchman, wrapped in a blanket against the cold. He heard why we were there and waited with us as the wintry dawn revealed a scene of countless families getting ready for the day.

Smoke rose from little breakfast

Gille

Attending funerals was a regular weekend occurence for many South Africans during the state-of-emergency years. Molly Blackburn, Ethel Walt and Joyce Harris welcomed at Lingalethu.

fires. Children in school uniforms and men in fresh white shirts emerged from plastic huts. Women bustled with the food and some dressed for work in town. Some people dismantled their homes and hid the materials but most left the structures standing. It must have been quite a hard decision, whether to go to so much trouble or to take the chance of being spared that day.

We began to think that people would be spared that morning, but then we heard a steady hum. Soon a caravan of casspirs, flat-bed trucks and other vehicles appeared. It stopped on the far side and workmen leapt from the trucks and immediately began the job of taking the huts apart and stacking the plastic and poles to be removed.

By this time the officials had noticed Mary and me. Mary had walked among the people while I stood next to my car. A man bore down on me and his first question was crazy apartheid-speak, uttered without an inkling of irony: "Do you have a permit to be in a black residential area?" He promised we would hear from them — but we never did. A letter to the *Cape Times* about what we witnessed was published and was also used in an editorial about the daily destruction carried out at KTC.

Candy Malherbe

Last laugh

Mary and Isabel were standing on the steps of St Albans in support of the hunger strikers in prison. It was lunch time. About 20 people were sitting or lying on the lawns around us enjoying the sun. A young whitey drove past us, shouting abuse. He was leaning out of his window looking back, waving his fists and continuing with his four-letter compliments when he went bang into the car in front of him.

The people on the lawn went wild, gleefully clapping hands and jumping up and down while Mary and Isabel tried hard to keep straight faces.

Issie Pretorius

Sadness and song

Over the years of doing this work — with its huge sadness, its brutality — we have encountered its poignant moments, its tragic ones, its tense ones and its funny ones. We have travelled countless thousands of kilometres in and out of the mine dumps, through the dusty highveld in drought, through the cosmos fields at the end of the summers, in the sewerage works where you find the flamingoes, spoonbills and large herds of happy cows that the city doesn't know about.

We came to greet our own taps with bowing respect each morning, earning shaking heads from family members. We have watched, in awe and with fear, the landscape of the metropole change on such a scale, and with such enormous implications, as has not been experienced since gold was discovered on the Witwatersrand. We felt profound happiness when we saw women, within weeks of arriving at "a safe place", tending marigolds and spinach in their gardens, and sweeping the dust in their yards of the places they could then call "home".

We sat in thousands of hours of meetings and conflict, where the officials deliberately spoke English so that squatters couldn't understand, and in coffin factories where late-night meetings lit up the coffins in ghoulish candlelight. We made friends of strange strangers, and lost Abu Asvat who was a close and loved colleague and helper. He showed us how it was possible not to be overwhelmed by the enormity of it all. We all tried to do our bit, and we tried to develop community and respect while we did it. We also composed a fun cabaret of songs to fit the different situations and cases, and that cheered us up lots of times.

Josie Adler

Time to party

Having been a Black Sash member since 1955, I was one of the five Black Sash women chosen to attend the President's luncheon on 23 July 1994, given for "Veterans of our Struggle for Freedom". It was held in the grounds of the President's Pretoria residence, under an enormous marquee.

I went on a bus from Shell House in Johannesburg, sitting among elated East Rand township women, all of whom had run safe houses or organised underground ANC branches or seen their children leave the country to join MK. As we reached Pretoria they couldn't sit still: they sang and toyi-toyied in the aisle. At the lunch I sat with a group of men from the Eastern Cape whose combined time on Robben Island probably totalled more than 100 years.

It was a great struggle for the organisers (Joe Slovo was the Master of Ceremonies) to bring us all to order — people kept jumping up, recognising each other from years

before, embracing, asking, "did you ever think we'd live to see this day?"

The food and drink were plentiful. Many of the people in attendance seemed to be staff inherited by the President from the previous administration: if they were bemused they didn't show it. In his address President Mandela said it was right that the premises should be taken over for the day by the people who had suffered longest under the cruelty.

The (joyfully) delayed proceedings caused trouble for people missing flights home. I went back in my bus, with my companions loaded down with generously distributed left-overs for their families — fruit juice, wine, chocolates, flowers and even a plastic bag or two full of stew. What a day!

Marie Dyer

Have we arrived?

"To travel hopefully is better than to arrive" — one of the best-known observations of Robert Louis Stevenson, and much more appealing than the words that follow: "... and the true success is to labour." The full quotation stirs some 40-year-old memories: has it any relevance to our present/recent dilemma?

In the summer of 1952-53 small groups in various parts of our country met to discuss South Africa's political future. The 1953 election was approaching, and it was widely believed that the National Party's victory in 1948 had been a flash in the pan, and the United Party was about to return to power. I belonged to a Joburg group of Wits academics and several ANC supporters from Alexandra township; our exchange was fruitful and we shared the objective of a common society. Nevertheless the white members felt the only possible strategy was to work for the UP until the election, and then launch a campaign for the adoption of more progressive policies.

This fantasy was shattered by the election results, and there was a crowded meeting in the Darragh Hall at which it was decided that the situation had freed us from the necessity of working through the UP; the Liberal Party was founded forthwith.

The comment of one of our Alexandra friends was: "You will be in the wilderness for 40 years!" We worked for 15, and had the temerity to put up one or two candidates in municipal, provincial or parliamentary elections, invariably losing our deposits, until racially-mixed political organisations were made illegal. Four-fifths of our membership was then black. The LP decided to fight alone, and the question raised among Black Sash members — whether we should maintain our separate political identity — obviously arises from totally different circumstances. Is it helpful to draw comparisons and consider differences?

For the stalwart workers in our Advice Offices there is no problem: there will be difficulties to tax their patience, compassion and dedication for as far ahead as any of us can see. The rest of us, however, are experiencing an ambivalent reaction. We proclaim — rightly — that the objects for which our organisation was founded have largely been achieved, which is surely cause of rejoicing, and yet one hears expressions of genuine regret at the prospect of ceasing our other activities.

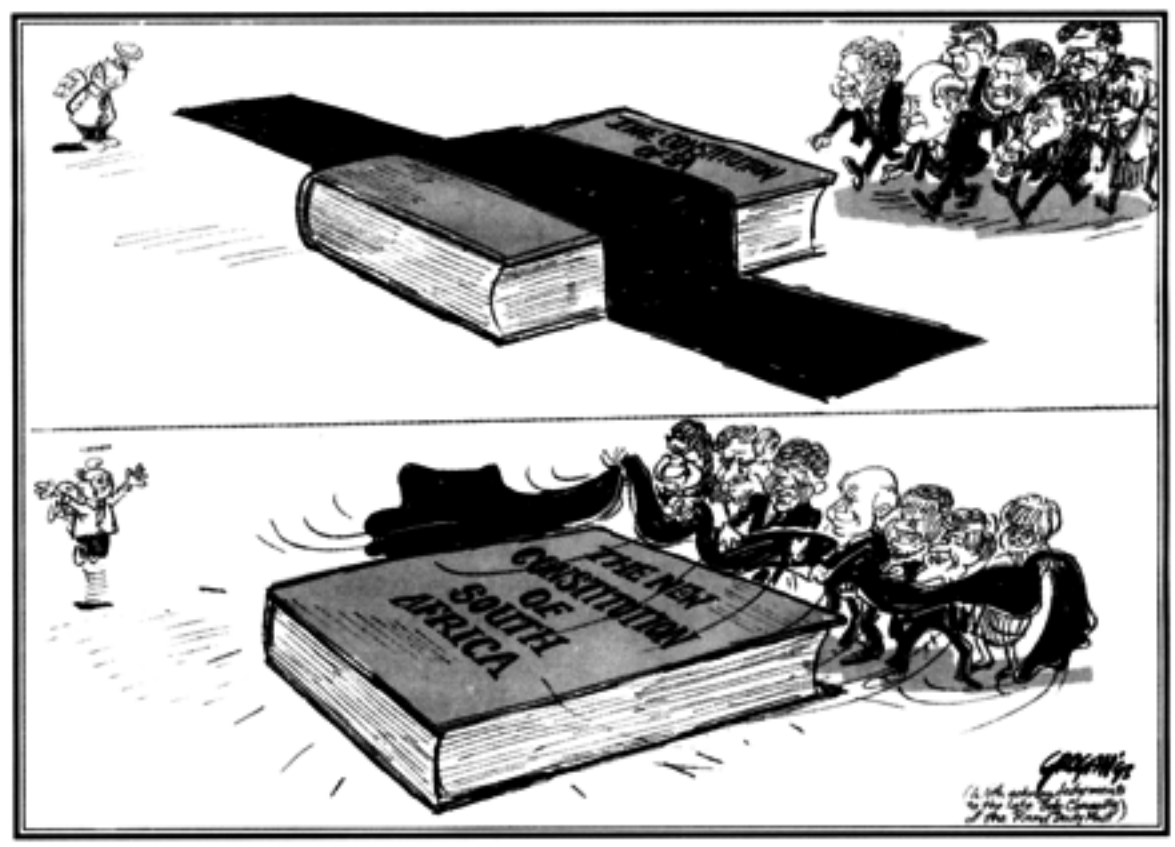
"Sash has been my dominant interest for X years and I am proud of what we have done, but sad that it may not continue," has been a typical comment. I myself used to think I could die happy if the pass laws were abolished. I never dreamed to see universal franchise in South Africa, but now that the excitement of change is behind us there is almost a sense of anti-climax.

Paradoxically, the apartheid policy united us — in opposition! Now we are left with the hurly-burly of politics in a democratic society, with the possibility that on this or that issue we may find ourselves in disagreement with close friends. Our concern for human rights remains, but it must be exercised in political parties where we shall be much smaller fry, and the warm camaraderie is gone.

Are there compensations? We shall lose our "white middle class" image. This is due to historical circumstances and need not be regretted, but now we must work with individuals regardless of colour, class or gender — to our mutual enrichment. In less homogeneous company we shall need more courage and more humility — the will to learn from those who cherish the same ideals but whose insights have developed from different experience, and many of whom have sacrificed and suffered far more than we can imagine.

Democracy has come but it is a means not an end. Utopia will not arrive, but the hopeful travellers will never be superfluous.

Mary Livingstone ❑



Tony Grogan, Cape Times 1993

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