

# The funeral

Laura Pollecutt reports

Gavin Blackburn chose, quite rightly, to have Molly's funeral in her regular place of worship — the Methodist Church.

It was a difficult decision because it was obvious that the crowds would spill out into the street beyond the church walls and, being within a white area, this would give the police an excuse to be out in full force . . . not a recipe for a peaceful funeral.

We, Black Sash members from other areas, were warned to be at the church as early as possible if we wished to gain a place inside. The funeral was set for 10 am and, on our arrival at 8, the church was already beginning to fill up. By 9 am every bit of space had been taken. Chairs were also laid out in the passages and rooms adjacent to the main body of the church and the sound system was set up to broadcast the service to people in the streets outside.

During our wait we sat peacefully in the church with the other mourners who, every now and again, broke into song. As they sang we cried, for their voices conveyed the despair of all the oppressed in South Africa and the true depth of the emotion they felt on Molly, their saviour's, death: 'Who shall speak for us now, Molly Blackburn?'

The service was an ecumenical one, with the Re-

verend George Irvine the host, assisted by Reverend Paul Verryn and with tributes from Bishop John Murphy, Bishop Bruce Evans and the Reverend H M Dandala. It was attended by other prominent churchmen, dignitaries and by staff of the various consulates. There was also a strong delegation of PFP Members of Parliament and Members of the Provincial Council.

Approximately a half hour before the ceremony was due to begin, a controlled and serene-looking Di Bishop was wheeled in and our hearts went out to her in her personal grief. Unfortunately she had to suffer having cameras and video equipment thrust at her as she was wheeled along. While waiting, people went to pay their respects to her and even grown men had tears in their eyes.

Tributes to Molly were paid by the PFP, Black Sash and UDF, as well as by local community leader Mkuseli Jack. Each seemed to feel the inadequacy of words to convey the feelings we all felt. Alex Boraine of the PFP said of her: 'She epitomised the quality of a bridge so desperately needed in our land — and, like a bridge, people sometimes walked all over her. But she never minded so long as she could unite black and white.'

Sheena, too, paid tribute and said that Molly, along with Brian Bishop, 'had changed the course of history.' Mkuseli Jack, who had worked so often alongside Molly, said 'She did not compromise with injustice.'

Soon after this the enormous crowd (estimated at 20 000) gradually dispersed in a highly disciplined manner, watched by the large security force on standby.



Site of the Langa shooting. To ease the tension amongst the crowd who gathered when Justice Kannemeyer went to do an *in loco* inspection, Molly knelt down and a large part of the crowd followed suit.

photos: Colin Urquhart, Eastern Province Herald





Di and Brian Bishop at their home in Cape town with Siphiwo Mtimkulu on Christmas Eve, 1981. Di explains: It was Siphiwo who brought Brian and me into much closer contact with Molly. For though we had been involved in investigating living conditions of certain squatter communities, it was Molly's phone-call from Port Elizabeth to us about Siphiwo in November 1981 that got Brian and me involved in the question of detainees and extended our work with Molly.

Siphiwo, who as a member of Cosas, had been in detention for some five months. He was detained on Republic Day 1981. His parents were never informed. For weeks they hunted for him and it was through the release of other detainees that they learnt that he had been seen in police custody with gun shot wounds. His father then discovered his whereabouts and it was confirmed that he had been shot and was having treatment to a wound on his arm. He had been detained under Sect 6 of the old Terrorism Act.

Within two days of his release at the end of October 1981 he became very ill. Not being able to diagnose his problem the hospital staff in Port Elizabeth made arrangements for him to be transferred to Groote Schuur in Cape Town. Molly had phoned to ask us to visit Siphiwo.

At Groote Schuur, where he was under the care of Professor Francis Ames, it was discovered that he had thallium poisoning. The symptoms of this poison only appear some weeks after it is imbibed. This diagnosis gave rise to the assumption that Siphiwo must have received the poison during the time he was in detention. There was a great deal of publicity about it and a claim for damages of R140 000 against the police was instituted.

Siphiwo spent two months at Groote Schuur. During that time we got special permission to have him with us for Christmas. When he was discharged from Groote Schuur at the end of January he became an out-patient at the hospital in Port Elizabeth. On April 13 he left home with his friend, Topsy Madaka to visit the hospital where he was to collect his aeroplane ticket and other papers. At that stage the court case was still pending. He and Madaka never reached the hospital. To this

day his whereabouts and those of Madaka have never been discovered.

Brian, who was chairman of the Civil Rights League, took up the matter of Siphiwo and Madaka's disappearance. The Civil Rights League offered a reward of R1 000 to anyone who could supply information that would lead to their whereabouts. That reward is still unclaimed but the interest that Brian generated around the disappearance has since waned.

Dear Sash Members,

I know you will all forgive me for replying in this way to your kind message of sympathy and affection. Dearly as I would love to respond to each of you individually, I fear that with all the other responsibility now on my shoulders it would take me many months to do so.

My children and I would like you all to know how much we appreciate your love for Molly and your concern for us. As you can imagine, her death has left us completely devastated, but it has been of tremendous comfort to us to realise how much she was loved and by how many, and how personal was the sense of loss felt by an enormous number, many of whom had had only brief and infrequent contact with her.

One aspect of that wonderful ceremony of Molly's funeral deserves special comment I think. This is the fact that there was such a cross-section of the population, and that there was no incident. It showed a vast number of South African citizens that it is possible, even easy as many remarked, for all 'groups' to breathe the same air, pray together, mourn together, live side by side, without the sun stopping in the heavens. And this I believe is one of Molly's main messages. She was not a politician: certainly she had no political ambitions or aspirations. But she did have a very strong sense of right and wrong, and cared for people. Therefore she could not abide the injustices and inhumanity shown to so many by the upholders and enforcers of Nationalist Party policy.

This message must not be allowed to go unheeded. The help and care that is required by so many must continue to pour out from every concerned person. Contact must be made and maintained, and we must realise that such contact can only be achieved by each and every one of us making effort and sacrifice. It cannot be achieved by comfortable arm-chair platitudes.

**We must get ourselves to the funerals of victims of the injustices, to the courts for the trials of those who are being harassed, to the authorities to help those whose husbands, wives, children have been detained and who can get little or no redress.**

**For these are things that Molly did, and there was ample evidence at her funeral of how much it was appreciated.**

We can no longer afford the complacency with which we have all viewed these events to date. On the day after Molly died I remarked to a friend 'This is something that happens to other people'. One's own experience of it makes one realise what these other people suffer. I believe we must now start to feel what other people suffer before it happens to us.

GAVIN BLACKBURN

January, 1986