

“An absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle”: Molly Fischer (1908-1964) – wife, mother and struggle activist

Hannes Haasbroek

National Museum

Research Fellow, Department of History

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

history@nasmus.co.za

Abstract

This article concentrates on the life and times of Molly Fischer, wife of the renowned Communist and struggle-activist Bram Fischer. Molly and Bram's life was not only woven together by their love for each other, but also by their love of Socialism and Communism coupled with their sincere endeavours to uplift the black community. She was as fervent a Communist and activist as Bram and in these circles was applauded for the unselfish manner in which she took up the cudgels for the oppressed people in the country. Molly is probably one of the few white women in the struggle-history of South Africa who had an Afrikaans background and who made a notable contribution to this cause. Her contribution remained rather obscured to the general public when compared with that of her famous husband. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to emphasise how she played her part as a struggle-activist and how she, as her husband's soul mate, supported him throughout his public and political life and, in the interests of their cause, never backed away from the mistrust which they were obliged to endure from their Afrikaner compatriots. Also her role as mother, and for that matter homemaker, is taken into consideration. A great deal of Molly's everyday life centred on their son's welfare who suffered from cystic fibrosis.

Keywords: Molly Fischer; Bram Fischer; Struggle; Communist Party; Rivonia Trial; Nelson Mandela; Struggle Activists; Equal Rights; Wife; Mother.

Introduction

It is usually the renowned South African struggle-activist, Communist and Afrikaner Bram Fischer (1908-1975) who is placed in the forefront

of the struggle historiography of this era. Through the years the following works were published containing comprehensive studies on the life of Bram Fischer: S Clingman, *Bram Fischer – Afrikaner revolutionary* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998); H Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram* (Cape Town, Umuzi, 2011); M Meredith, *Fischer's choice – A life of Bram Fischer* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2002); G Frankel, *Rivonia's children – Three families and the price of freedom in South Africa* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999) and N Mitchison, *A life for Africa – The story of Bram Fischer* (London, Merlin Press, 1973). In 2007 a documentary on his life, titled *Love, Communism, Revolution and Rivonia: Bram Fischer's Story*, was produced for TV.

Rightly so, as it was indeed he, who, as an advocate during the apartheid years, spearheaded the defence in several of the foremost struggle court cases in the country, amongst others, the Rivonia Trial (1963-1964) defending well-known persons such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Rusty Bernstein and Denis Goldberg, so saving them from the death penalty. On a personal and political level, Bram's sincere efforts to promote struggle interests made a deep impression on Nelson Mandela.¹ Many a black freedom fighter was and remains of the opinion that it was Bram Fischer who checked their radical black nationalism in favour of a non-racial democratic South Africa.²

In addition, Bram as leader of the South African Communist Party (SACP) operating underground, played a significant role in the years of struggle and achieved international respect, particularly during his own court appearance when he was sentenced to life imprisonment because of his Communist activities and support for sabotage. Furthermore, attention was focussed on him as a sufferer of cancer while in prison and there were attempts worldwide to have him released as an act of clemency to allow him to die with dignity at home.

1 N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom – The autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London, Macdonald Purnell, 1994), pp. 462, 742, 748.

2 M du Preez, "Wat rym met Bram?", *BY (Volksblad)*, 21 July 2007, p. 20.

It is not generally known, except in struggle circles and those who read the biographies on Bram Fischer, that his wife, Molly,³ was an equally fervent Communist and activist and that she wholeheartedly stood at her husband's side in the cause of the struggle. Up to now no scientific article was published on Molly Fischer. Therefore, this article concentrates on the life and times of Molly; how she played her part as a struggle-activist and how she supported her husband throughout his public and political life and, in the interests of their cause, never backed away from the mistrust which they were obliged to endure from their Afrikaner compatriots. Also her role as mother and homemaker is taken into consideration.

It is important to realise that Molly Fischer usually worked behind the scenes to further struggle interests, being involved in activities such as fund collecting, supporting her husband and helping those in their circle who were harassed by the security police.⁴ Furthermore she seldom appeared on stage to be part of public Struggle-rhetoric. Her low-profile tendencies resulted in her actions not always being as well documented as were those of her husband. It can, therefore, be difficult to present a clear description of her life as a struggle-activist in the fullest sense. Nevertheless, letters she wrote to family and friends, personal interviews with her two daughters, as well as Clingman's well-documented book titled *Bram Fischer – Afrikaner revolutionary* and other biographies of Bram in which Molly also figures, were most useful for reconstructing the life of this remarkable woman.

3 Molly, christened Susanna Johanna, descended as did her husband, from a distinguished family. Her father was PS Krige who, during the First World War served as adjutant to General JC Smuts and thereafter, worked as a surveyor. Her mother, Emmy, was the eldest of five children of the Rhenish missionary F Bernsmann and his wife, Emilie. Molly's father's sister, Isie, was married to General Smuts. Despite this family tie, the Krige's were an ordinary family, not at all wealthy, who lived on a small-holding in Silverton, Pretoria, where Molly was born on 23 February 1908. Molly attended an English school, the Pretoria Girls' High School. At school she excelled at gymnastics and hockey and completed her matriculation at the age of sixteen, the year in which she was also elected a Prefect. However, her status as a prefect was revoked after she had bunked school to watch a rugby match. Molly was a sparkling, energetic and sporty person whose characteristics were occasionally restrained by a shy and pensive nature. Above all, she had a rather mischievous streak which could catch many unaware (available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, accessed 17 May 2011); S Clingman, *Bram Fischer – Afrikaner revolutionary* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1998), pp. 2–4, 61; H Haasbroek, "Die advokaat se vrou", *Rooi Rose*, July 2008, p. 206.

4 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice – A life of Bram Fischer* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2002), pp. 43, 71, 87-88.

Molly Krige's marriage to Bram Fischer

Molly Krige met Bram Fischer⁵ for the first time in 1927 when, on a visit to Bloemfontein as a member of the Transvaal University College's (later the University of Pretoria) hockey team, she played a match at the Ramblers Club. Because of the lack of the necessary funds to pursue her first choice of career namely that of a veterinary surgeon, she was obliged to turn to a career in teaching.⁶

Three years after they first met, Bram who had studied law and was serving as Registrar of the Circuit Court, coincidentally reunite with Molly in Bethlehem where she was teaching. Her carefree nature made her popular amongst the pupils but offended the school administration.⁷ At night, she sometimes quietly also visited the Bethlehem cemetery to meditate about life. It was, in fact, one night in January 1931 in the cemetery in Bethlehem that Bram declared his love for Molly.⁸ Her rather darker side was indeed one of her characteristics which appealed to him. Subsequently a fairly vacillating relationship developed, strengthened by copious correspondence.⁹ Each of them had a strong personality which resulted in a fairly complex relationship.¹⁰

Although Bram held anti-imperialistic views, this did not prevent him from pursuing the family tradition which was to study overseas and acquire knowledge of the world after he had been awarded a LL.B degree at the University College in Bloemfontein in 1931.¹¹ In December 1931 he boarded a ship for England to continue his studies in law at Oxford.¹² Molly and Bram were to correspond regularly while he was abroad.¹³ A world of new influences awaited the Free Stater. It was a time of ideological turbulence in Europe when Capitalism and Communism were being weighed against each other. Oxford accommodated sundry diverse liberal and progressive

5 Bram was the eldest son of the well-known Bloemfontein couple Percy and Ella Fischer. Percy was the Judge President of the Free State and son of the eminent Free State politician and leader Abraham Fischer (Prime Minister of the Orange River Colony 1907-1910). Ella, who came from the influential Fichardt family, was a well-known community leader and novelist. H Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram* (Cape Town, Umuzi, 2011), pp. 8-9.

6 Available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, accessed 17 May 2011.

7 At a later stage, Molly was dismissed from the Domestic Science School in Bethlehem, apparently because she was too much of a free spirit. See S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 69.

8 H Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 60.

9 Free State Provincial Archives, Bloemfontein (FSPA), Accession (A), Reference 750 (unarranged): Love, Politics and Marriage: The Fischer Letters 1930-1937 (by Stephen Clingman), 1984.

10 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 60-67.

11 *Jaarboek van die Grey-universiteitskollege* (Bloemfontein, 1932), pp. 115; 1933, 230.

12 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice*, pp. 16-19.

13 FSPA, A, Reference 653/4, 3: Letter, E Fischer/B Fischer, 6 January 1932.

associations. His interest was also aroused by the Soviet Union. During the summer of 1932 Bram, with three Oxford students, toured Russia. In his letters, amongst others to Molly and his family, he gave his impression of his whirlwind tour in these foreign parts and it was clear that he was impressed with the Soviet Union.¹⁴

Bram was keen to see Molly again and to strengthen their relationship. Instead of establishing himself in Bloemfontein where the Fischer name enjoyed great esteem which would undoubtedly have benefitted his legal career, Bram decided to start his career as an advocate in Johannesburg from January 1935. He would also be nearer to Molly who was working in Pretoria.¹⁵

Bram, very much in love as revealed in his many romantic letters to Molly,¹⁶ was shaken by her decision to take a teaching post in Windhoek, South West Africa (now Namibia) for a year from April 1936. As had happened in Bethlehem, her unconventionality and spontaneity disturbed the school authorities, but she was very popular amongst the school girls. Before long, Molly let Bram know that she would marry him at any time. The final snag prior to the wedding was Molly's decision to visit Europe once her contract in Windhoek had expired. Molly visited England, Germany, France and the Netherlands. In August 1937, she was back in South Africa and Bram insisted that they were to marry at once.¹⁷

Bram and Molly, who was precisely two months older than he, were married in the garden of his parents' house, Harmonie, in Bloemfontein on 18 September 1937.¹⁸ Percy and Ella took an instant liking to Molly.¹⁹ From the start, there was a strong bond between Molly and her well-known parents-in-law with their nationalistic views. Her letter to Ella from Windhoek on 26 February 1937 in fact read:²⁰

I've always been terribly sorry for any girl who couldn't marry Bram, now I am beginning to feel sorry for any girl who can't have such nice parents-in-law. I just adore you for letting me marry Bram and spoiling me so much on top of it all.

14 FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/2, 2: Letter: B Fischer/P Fischer, 19 August 1932.

15 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 103-104; G Budlender, "Bram Fischer – The man and the lawyer", *Consultus*, November 1995, p. 161.

16 FSPA, A, Reference 750: Love, politics and marriage: The Fischer Letters 1930 – 1937 (by Stephen Clingman, 1984).

17 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 115, 124.

18 FSPA, A, Reference 653/10: Wedding invitation: Bram/Molly, 18 September 1937.

19 FSPA, A, Reference 653/4, 3: Letter: E Fischer/B Fischer, 6 January 1932.

20 FSPA, A, Reference 653/2/1, 2: Letter: M Fischer/E Fischer, 26 February 1937.

Amongst family, friends and acquaintances, the bond of love between Molly and Bram was legendary.²¹ When, at one stage, Molly experienced a pain in one of her breasts, it was feared that she might have breast cancer as this condition had been the cause of her mother's death. Bram, extremely distressed about his wife's condition, let his parents know that he, in this "first miserable night of our married life", realized what to him was of importance in life and this was not the situation in Europe.²² Fortunately Molly's condition was not serious. Uys Krige, the well-known poet and author and Molly's second cousin, once remarked that Bram's and Molly's marriage was to him one of the happiest and most exemplary unions that he had known in his long life.²³

Molly as mother

In Johannesburg the newly-wed couple settled down in a flat on the Westcliff ridge with a view stretching northwards to the Maggadiesberg mountains.²⁴ Molly's prospects to raise her first child in a flat fortunately did not materialise. Instead, she would have experienced motherhood in a comfortable home.

12 Beaumont Street

It was the advocate's intense desire to present his wife with a real home. In April 1939, a pregnant Molly moved into a recently completed double storey dream home at 12 Beaumont Street, Oaklands, in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg.²⁵ They had three children: Ruth (born in 1939), Ilse (in 1943) and Paul (in 1947, died 1971). To be children of parents supporting the Communist ideology in South Africa was not easy for them. Molly and Bram explained everything in the simplest terms to their children: they did not approve of the government and the government was hostile towards the Communists and the struggle.²⁶

21 G Bizos, *Odyssey to freedom* (Houghton, Random House, 2007), p. 285.

22 FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/3, 2: Letter: B Fischer/E Fischer, 7 September 1939.

23 *Rapport*, 6 May 1973

24 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 25.

25 FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/3, 2: Letter: B Fischer/P Fischer, 28 April 1939.

26 FSPA, A, 653/10, 3: Letter: B Fischer/E Fischer, undated; S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 126, 168, 184, 223. Ruth, and especially Ilse, supported the progressive political sentiments of their parents and were very open-minded about political matters as they were allowed to speak freely on this subject in their parents' home. See S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 222-224, 233, 265-267, 347-348. Today Ruth (Rice) lives in Cape Town and Ilse (Wilson) lives in Johannesburg.

Robert Smith, who as a young boy lived with his parents diagonally opposite the Fischers in Beaumont Street and often played with the Fischer children, particularly with Paul, remembers them as friendly people, although Molly could be hot-tempered when discipline had to be maintained.²⁷ Ruth confirms this: "As children our friends were very keen to come to our home ... My mother was similarly sincere and warm-hearted."²⁸

A great deal of Molly's everyday's life as homemaker centred on Paul's welfare. From an early age, her son suffered from a short-windedness from which he could not recover.²⁹ Paul was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis, a recessive genetic condition which, amongst others, results in the lungs filling with thick mucus which would not lessen.³⁰ Paul's life expectancy was six years, but he battled on bravely and died at the age of twenty-three. In all probability he reached this age because of the painstaking support he received from his parents.³¹ With patience and love, obstacles were overcome. There was always a fear that he could die suddenly.³² Ruth remembers that her mother had a sense of fun and enjoyed life, but that the endless care she gave Paul often left her exhausted.³³

Although the Fischer home appeared to radiate an atmosphere of cheerful camaraderie, it was in fact a meeting place for leftists and anti-apartheid activists of all racial groups. Many parties were held there such as those which commemorated Communist activities and it was a place where family and friends could visit whenever they wished and were hospitably welcomed, but there were times when an atmosphere of solemnity prevailed. By means of the power at its disposal, the National Party government and its security police continued in the 1960's to ruthlessly suppress the underground opposition as

27 R Smith (Personal Collection), interview, H Haasbroek (Historian, National Museum, Bloemfontein), 1 December 2011.

28 W Brümmer, "n Pa soos Bram" (interview with R Rice), *BY (Volksblad)*, 25 June 2011, p. 6.

29 FSPA, A, Reference 653/10, 3: M Fischer/E Fischer, 13 November 1959.

30 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 218.

31 H Haasbroek, "Bram Fischer en 'n seun soos Paul", *Culna*, 63, November 2008, p. 23.

32 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 217-220. As a result of the progress made in the sphere of medicine and the more effective medication available, someone suffering from cystic fibrosis can be kept in reasonable health and have a longer life expectancy today provided that a strict diet is adhered to. In 2008 Peter Laird, at the age of fifty-one, was the longest surviving patient suffering from this disease which had been diagnosed when he was six months old. Despite the progress made in this field, experts agree that even today to bring up a child with cystic fibrosis, requires an exerted effort on the part of the family. Cf. G Warren-Brown, "Living with Cystic Fibrosis", *Life (Healthcare)*, Autumn, 2008, pp. 39-41.

33 W Brümmer, "n Pa soos Bram" (interview with Ruth Rice), p. 7. In the late 1950's, when an old friend of Bram's was standing for election to the Johannesburg City Council as an independent liberal, Molly broke her ban to serve at an election table but did not speak about politics, but quietly about Paul. See S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 223.

embodied in the South African Communist Party. In fact, as early as 1953, the first police raid took place on the Fischer home in search of illegal documents and pamphlets.³⁴

When Molly was detained in April 1960 for her Communist activities, it had a disruptive influence on the Fischer home. Ruth was in Cape Town at the time and at home, Ilse, now in her final year at school, had to stand in and assist with the housekeeping and keep an eye on Paul.³⁵

It was these tendencies which to an increasing extent tarnished the cordial atmosphere in the Fischer home.

The case of Nora Mlambo

The adoption by Molly and Bram of the black child Nora Mlambo in the 1940s required adjustments in the Fischer household. The adopting of Nora was an extremely unusual way of doing at the time in which they lived. She was more or less Ilse's age and the child of a deceased sister of the Fischer's maid, Mary Mlambo. A home had to be found for Nora and because of their progressive political views, Molly and Bram spontaneously came to the decision to adopt her. Mary was a little hesitant as she wished the child to grow up in accordance with traditions and customs of her tribe. Molly and Bram convinced her that with the means at their disposal, they could provide Nora with a better education. In every respect, Nora was brought up in their home with the other children as their own child. She called Molly and Bram by their first names. In spite of this, close friends of the Fischers stated afterwards that it always seemed that Nora did not feel at home in the white Fischer household, particularly so when there were guests.³⁶

Nora's case created uneasiness during the apartheid era. Her aunt was the maid in the Fischer home where she lived and she and Ilse were required to attend different schools. By means of the necessary explanations and goodwill, obstacles were overcome.³⁷ Naturally there were those who perceived this state

34 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, pp. 36, 43.

35 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 265-266.

36 *Dagbreek*, 8 May 1966; Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 196. Apparently Nora was adopted by Molly and Bram when she was three years old and until then had lived in the then Vlakfontein Township in Pretoria. See *Dagbreek*, 8 May 1966.

37 I Wilson (née Fischer)/R Rice (née Fischer) (Personal Collection), interview, D du Bruyn (Historian, National Museum, Bloemfontein), 4 May 2007.

of affairs as an unholy Communist experiment and considered it as nothing less than an attempt to provoke the government.³⁸

The opinions of those of other persuasions who found it difficult to come to terms with this situation were taken into consideration. In Beaumont Street, Molly and Bram usually avoided any uneasiness by having their own children eat with Nora in the kitchen while the adults ate in the dining room. For instance, when Ella was on her way to pay a visit, Molly would usually quietly mention to Bram something to the effect that “Ouma is coming, what about the girls, she is too old to change her ways”.³⁹

Nora became pregnant at school. Molly paid for her to complete her schooling by correspondence. With a baby boy and with a husband, Nora was essentially back within her own culture so that she and the Fischers became estranged. Furthermore, in the prevailing political milieu Bram’s and Molly’s lives became ominously complex which drew their attention away from Nora.⁴⁰

Family relations

As a rule, Molly and Bram, never tried to hide their leftist views from their family, particularly not from his parents with their nationalistic sentiments although they naturally did not disclose everything. Ella and Percy probably had difficulty in coming to terms with the Communist views of their son and daughter-in-law, particularly in view of their prominent status in the Afrikaner community. Nevertheless, they resigned themselves to this and always received them with open arms.⁴¹

Despite political differences, Molly and Bram always had the interests of their family at heart and issued friendly invitations to them to visit.⁴² The enduring close bond which existed between them, particularly between Bram and his mother, sometimes tended towards interference, but did not bother Molly. In many respects, Ella was a dear person with an overwhelming love

38 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 171.

39 I Wilson (née Fischer)/R Rice (née Fischer) (Personal Collection), interview, D du Bruyn (Historian, National Museum, Bloemfontein), 4 May 2007.

40 H Haasbroek, *’n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 197.

41 I Wilson (née Fischer)/R Rice (née Fischer) (Personal Collection), interview, D du Bruyn (Historian, National Museum, Bloemfontein), 4 May 2007; FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/3, 8: Letter, B Fischer/E Fischer, 28 January 1945.

42 FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/3, 15: Letter: B Fischer/Parents, 30 April 1952.

for her family.⁴³ For this reason, her excessive attachment to her family did not really bother anyone, simply because she meant so well.⁴⁴ After a visit to the Fischer farm near Bloemfontein Molly wrote to her mother-in-law, saying: “We had a lovely weekend & we returned home refreshed & in high spirit ... Thank you so much for a lovely weekend.”⁴⁵

Molly and Bram enjoyed the visits of their family, especially those of their parents, as well as of friends, colleagues and acquaintances who did not share their political views and were unaware of their underground activities, but these visits were to them clearly stressful. Bram’s busy underground activities and legal work required careful planning. In the politically open Beaumont home, they went out of their way to create a perfectly normal atmosphere in order not to give unnecessary offence. They could always claim that the visits of members of other racial groups were, in fact, those of Bram’s clients.

Molly as struggle-activist

Member of Communist Party

Disappointed by the lack of action on the part of white leftists in their opposition to the separation of the races, Molly and Bram moved ever closer to the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) as this was the only party which could comfortably accommodate all races.⁴⁶ It was apparently Bram’s influence which persuaded Molly to enter into politics.⁴⁷ Although there is some uncertainty regarding the exact date of their becoming members of the Communist Party of South Africa, it would seem that by 1942, they were both members of this party.⁴⁸

Growth as a leader: Municipal candidacy

Molly also spread her wings. Riding the crest of the wave, Hilda Bernstein of the Communist Party won the municipal election in Hillbrow in 1944 –

43 I Wilson (née Fischer)/R Rice (née Fischer) (Personal Collection), interview, D du Bruyn (Historian, National Museum, Bloemfontein), 4 May 2007.

44 H Haasbroek, *in Seun soos Bram...*, pp. 186-196.

45 FSPA, A, Reference 653/2/2, 5: Letter: M Fischer/E Fischer, 24 March 1954.

46 D Welsh, *The rise and fall of Apartheid* (Johannesburg, Jonathan Ball, 2009), p. 45.

47 Available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, as accessed on 17 May 2011.

48 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 149.

the first and only Communist candidate ever to be voted onto the Council in Johannesburg by white voters. Bram and Molly had thrown their full weight behind her. In 1945 Molly was also courageous enough to stand for the Communist Party in the Johannesburg municipal elections. She was a candidate for Ward Three (Hospital/Braamfontein).⁴⁹

Although Molly began her campaign rather reticently, her self-confidence grew to such an extent that she fought a fierce campaign for improved local facilities.⁵⁰ She made use of her own two daughters to pose for a photograph featured on an election pamphlet, with the caption “Secure their future”.⁵¹

Regardless of *The Guardian's* prediction that Molly would defeat her opponents convincingly and make the fascist *Transvaler* look sheepish, Molly lost badly. None of the candidates put up by her party achieved any success. Molly drew 461 votes, the least number of votes of the four candidates who stood for election in that ward. The United Party (UP) candidate drew 2387 votes.⁵²

Enthusiastic activist and Communist

Throughout the years, Molly was as enthusiastic an activist and Communist as was her well-known husband.⁵³ Membership of the Communist Party, so she believed, infused their lives with so much more meaning in the oppressive political system which existed in South Africa. Walter Sisulu indeed remarked that Molly was particularly outspoken about her Communist views and that, other than was the case with other Communist hotheads, one could engage in a meaningful argument with her.⁵⁴ Mandela described Molly as “impressive, considerably more aggressive than Bram and having a warm personality”.⁵⁵

Bram and Molly worked untiringly to arouse public support for the Soviet Union during its conflict with Germany during the Second World War (1939-1945). In South Africa, the Soviet Union, as an ally of the Allied Forces against the Nazi's, was regarded at that time with sympathy from some

49 *The Guardian*, 26 July 1945; 25 October 1945; S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 176.

50 FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/3, 8: Letter: B Fischer/Parents, 22 June 1945.

51 *The Guardian*, 25 October 1945.

52 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 176- 178.

53 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, pp. 28, 31.

54 H Haasbroek, “Die advokaat se vrou”, *Rooi Rose*, July 2008, p. 206.

55 N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom ...*, p. 462

quarters, even from the government. Hundreds of new members joined the party in South Africa.

Molly and Bram otherwise kept themselves busy with addresses, lectures and fundraising by means of fetes and jumble sales to further struggle and Communist interests. In organisations such as the Friends of the Soviet Union, Medical Aid for Russia and especially the Left Club, Molly and Bram played key roles. Molly was somewhat amused when she discovered that people were surprised to meet Communists who were without knives, beards and red scarves. She told Ella and Percy that the public were shocked to see how perfectly ordinary and respectable Communists could be.⁵⁶

After the apartheid government had banned the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) in 1950, which had been legal until then, a new highly effective underground party named the South African Communist Party (SACP) was established in 1953 as opposed to the old legal CPSA. In practice it was no more than a continuation of the old party. Practically all the previous leaders and members of the party joined the new organisation. In addition to Molly and Bram, there were other well-known couples such as Rusty and Hilda Bernstein, Joe Slovo and Ruth First, Brian and Sonya Bunting, Ben and Mary Turok, Eli and Violet Weinberg and Jack and Rica Hodgson. The Central Committee was re-established. The party's headquarters would be in Johannesburg and the Secretariat of the region began to meet regularly. Less than one hundred members formed the nucleus of the party and most of these were from the Transvaal. They usually met in secret in small cell groups of four or five members but national gatherings also took place without the police becoming suspicious. A sort of cat-and-mouse game developed between the Communists and the security police. In large part, Molly belonged to all the organisations with which her husband was associated and actively participated in Communist cell activities, particularly the SACP's women's group. She was also a member of the Federation of South African Women.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 159, 168.

⁵⁷ R Bernstein, *Memory against forgetting – Memories from a life in South African Politics, 1938-1964* (London, Penguin, 1999), pp. 130-131; G Frankel, *Rivonia's children – Three families and the price of freedom in South Africa* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 86; M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 44 (available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, as accessed on 17 May 2011). In 1954 the Federation of South African Woman (FDSAW) was established presenting some 230 000 women drawn largely from the Congress Alliance, but especially from the ANC's Women's League. The federation had two primary aims: To work for majority rule and end the policy of apartheid, and to build a multiracial women's organization that would also work for the rights of, and freedom for, women (available at: <http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=4667&t=Women%60s%20Struggles>; <http://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/womens-struggle-1900-1994>, both accessed on 7 December 2012).

The Communist Party had been banned but the police remained suspicious. The government's special security police unit functioned independently of the police and had the authority to crush political opposition at their discretion. Telephone calls and meetings were monitored, post intercepted, activists kept under surveillance and photographed, gatherings infiltrated and registration numbers on vehicle number plates recorded.⁵⁸

Because the Fischers were being targeted by the security police, they became more vigilant about their movements. In July, 1954 when Molly, as Secretary of the South African Society for Peace and Friendship with the Soviet Union (SASPFSU) departed on a trip abroad, ostensibly to take a break from the stressful circumstances in which they were living, but evidently also to raise funds for the struggle, Bram appealed to his parents to remain silent about this trip and under no circumstances to refer to it in correspondence. During the four months Molly was abroad, she visited England, and with the help of anti-apartheid contacts, also visited China and the Soviet Union. Her travels took her through Eastern Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Wherever she went, Molly was welcomed with open arms by friends of the struggle and exposed to the socialist culture. During the parade in Peking commemorating the Chinese Revolution on 1 October 1954, Molly took her place with other delegates on the podium just below Mao Tse-tung. She was stunned by the overwhelming scale of the parade.⁵⁹

On her return to South Africa, Molly's movements were also restricted by the government and she was ordered to resign as secretary of the SASPFSU while, in addition, she was not permitted to attend any gatherings for the following five years.⁶⁰

In 1955, the liberal and revolutionary fronts as the Congress of the People held a vast gathering on an open piece of land or sports field at Kliptown near Johannesburg. The most important role players on this occasion were the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress and the Coloured People's Organisation, as well as the Congress of Democrats – together they formed the Congress Alliance. Naturally, several of the members of these organisations were also members of the clandestine Communist Party. This "congress of the people" discussed the Freedom Charter in which an

58 H Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 213.

59 Available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, as accessed on 17 May 2011; H Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 213.

60 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 202-210.

appeal was made for a multi-racial, democratic society – South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. As Molly's and Bram's movements had been restricted, they were unable to attend the congress. They demonstrated their support by watching the proceedings at a distance. Because they suspected treason was being planned, the heavily armed police abruptly terminated the gathering. The ANC adopted this Charter formally the following year.⁶¹

In terms of the General Law Amendment Act of 1962 which included the new offence of Sabotage, the Minister of Justice, John Vorster issued decrees of silence in public on one hundred and two individuals in that year. Molly and Bram were among them. This Act virtually gave the Minister unlimited power to counter the resistance movement in the country. People were placed under house arrest and branded as Communists, the Congress of Democrats was disbanded, protest marches prohibited and a left-wing newspaper such as *Spark* closed.⁶²

Fischer home an oasis for struggle associates

As the tentacles of apartheid carved ever deeper into South African society, the Fischer home in Beaumont Street gradually became a real home, an oasis, for their struggle associates, friends and acquaintances of all racial groups who shared the ideal of a non-racial world.⁶³ George Bizos remarked: "Everyone knew that Bram and Molly were absolutely committed to the struggle."⁶⁴ Nelson Mandela and Communists such as Moses Kotane and Michael Harmel, the Bernsteins, the Slovos and the Hodgsons visited there regularly.⁶⁵ At the Fischer house black and white could therefore talk to each other to their hearts content and for a while experience the freedom of association to which they all aspired. It was "a home with no racism" Ruth also recalled.⁶⁶

In March 1954, Bram and Molly had a swimming pool built at their home. Apparently this was built primarily for Paul's benefit so that he could exercise his lungs and his body.⁶⁷ Bearing in mind the Fischer's hospitality,

61 H Giliomee & B Mbenga (eds.), *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2007), pp. 328-329; M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, pp. 44-45.

62 H Haasbroek, 'n *Seun soos Bram...*, pp. 237-239.

63 N Mitchison, *A life for Africa – The story of Bram Fischer* (London, Merlin Press, 1973), pp. 69, 120-121; M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 35.

64 G Bizos, *Odyssey to freedom...*, p. 285.

65 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 220, 223.

66 *Love, communism, revolution and Rivonia: Bram Fischer's story* (DVD-M-Net), 24 September 2007.

67 H Haasbroek, "Bram Fischer en 'n seun soos Paul", *Culna*, 63, November 2008, pp. 23-24.

it was inevitable that the swimming pool would contribute to a congenial atmosphere at Beaumont Street where all racial groups would be at ease.⁶⁸ The home and swimming pool increasingly became a struggle-symbol, a place where they could socialise freely notwithstanding colour.

By the time the swimming pool was complete, the Communist Party had already gone underground but remained very active with Bram as one of the leaders. Although, by and large, the lifestyle of the Fischer family could be described as very ordinary and middle-class as was that maintained by many others in the northern part of Johannesburg – a comfortable double storey house with a large garden and a swimming pool, several retainers in service and holidays at the sea or in the game reserve - the security police did not trust the peace. Indeed, Beaumont Street became a sought after target for police spies. The gathering of so many black people at the Fischer's swimming pool also offended several of the neighbours in the vicinity, but Molly and Bram ignored them.⁶⁹

Although most members of the party, including Molly and Bram, were known amongst members of the public to be former Communists, nobody suspected that, in fact, they were members of an active, well-organised and disciplined underground Communist organisation.⁷⁰

Welfare work

Molly spent a great deal of her time on welfare work among black children. She always had a soft spot for the poor, for beggars and the oppressed and she enjoyed helping her fellow beings. When black customers in a shop were ignored while preferential service was given to a white, Molly was prepared to challenge the shopkeeper immediately. When black pupils and teachers boycotted schools in the 1950's because of their dissatisfaction with, amongst others things, the Bantu Education Act, Molly was prepared, as a teacher, to throw her weight behind the so-called private black schools (because the government would not permit such schools, they were

68 H Haasbroek, "Die Fischer-woning en -swembad in Beaumontstraat 12, Johannesburg: Simbool van rasseharmonie in apartheid Suid-Afrika", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 36(1), 2011, p. 180.

69 *Love, communism, revolution and Rivonia: Bram Fischer's story* (DVD - M-Net), 24 September 2007.

70 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 42.

known as ‘Culture Clubs’) so that they were not deprived of education.⁷¹

In prison

At the beginning of the 1960s, the police continued to arrest activists in terms of the state of emergency in the country proclaimed after the Sharpeville massacre, bringing the number of detainees to thousands.⁷²

It was generally thought that it would be Bram who would be arrested for his Communist activities, but it was Molly who was detained in April 1960. The authorities were determined to detain all dissidents on their list. The crackdown on Beaumont Street took place in the early morning. It would seem that Bram was overlooked because, as the advocate for the defence in the treason trial which was still in progress, his arrest would have caused the government considerable international embarrassment.⁷³ For the first time in her life, the 52 year old Molly Fischer was on her way to prison.

Molly was held in the Fort situated on a hill near Johannesburg Central as Number 417/60. The Fort had been a Boer fortress which dated from 1899. Many well-known persons such as Walter Sisulu and his wife, Albert Luthuli, Winnie Mandela, Barbara Hogan, Joe Slovo, Mahatma Ghandi and Nelson Mandela would find their way to this prison over the years. The 1914 rebels, including General CR de Wet, also served prison sentences here.⁷⁴

Molly and her activist friends, several from prominent social circles, as white prisoners were given comfortable quarters in the old hospital section. Initially, Molly resigned herself to her situation. In her letters to her family she put on a brave front saying that all was well and that they need not be concerned about her. At a later stage and under considerable protest, Molly and her friends were transferred to a prison in Pretoria. Now they were further away from their loved ones. A hunger strike followed which was intended to force the government to release them. The strike did not exactly have the desired effect

71 L Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo – beyond the Engeli mountains* (Cape Town, David Philip, 2004), pp. 210-212; H Haasbroek, “Die advokaat se vrou”, *Rooi Rose*, July 2008, p. 206 (available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, as accessed on 17 May 2011).

72 H Haasbroek, *‘n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 217.

73 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 265-266 (available at: http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/fischer_m.htm, as accessed on 17 May 2011).

74 HDB de Villiers, “Johannesburgse Fort”, *Restorica*, 18, October 1985, p. 6 (available at: <http://www.ekala.co.za/constitution-hill.html>, as accessed on 11 February 2010). Today the prison section is a museum while a new building housing the Constitutional Court has been built on the grounds.

but at least news of this leaked out which, in turn, led Helen Suzman to ask uncomfortable questions in Parliament.⁷⁵

As time went by it was understandable that Molly would become more emotional about her incarceration. She worried continuously about her son's health.⁷⁶ It would seem that cheerful letters from Paul put her mind at ease about her son who had now reached his teens.⁷⁷ She let her son know that his letters really cheered her up:⁷⁸

I at last received your letter yesterday, after nearly two weeks ... It cheered me up tremendously, as there is very little to break the monotony of our lives except visiting days twice a week ... I must be the slowest knitter amongst the lot of us, but I have finished your jersey except for the polo neck ... I loved getting special love from my family. So I send love to the household by the most special, specialist love to you. Look after yourself. Bram tells me that you now regulate your own insulin. That's wonderful and I'm terribly proud of you.

On 14 May 1960, approximately thirty white and black children of political prisoners between the ages of five and seventeen held a protest gathering which they organised themselves on the steps of the Johannesburg City Hall. Placards bearing words such as "I want my Mummy" and "Give us back our parents" were brandished around. Curious passers-by soon gathered around them and television teams from abroad got wind of sensation and rushed to the scene.⁷⁹

Ilse Fischer was one of the organisers of the protest and also participated in the rally. Together with a couple of other hotheads, they walked into the City Hall in an effort to convince the Mayor to intercede with the authorities on their behalf to have their parents released. In Cape Town, Ruth arranged a procession of children to Parliament where a petition to have the detainees released was handed over. Had publicity been the object of this exercise, it undoubtedly proved most successful.⁸⁰

On 1 July 1960 Molly, along with 1 200 other detainees, was released. Bram, Ruth and Ilse arrived in Pretoria to find Molly waiting for them outside the

75 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 270.

76 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 266-273.

77 FSPA, A, Reference 653/5, 9: Letter: P Fischer (Molly's son)/M Fischer, 28 April 1960.

78 FSPA, A, Reference 653/5, 9: Letter: M Fischer/P Fischer (Molly's son), 25 May 1960.

79 *Sunday Express*, 15 May 1960; *Golden City Post*, 15 May 1960.

80 *The Star*, 14 May 1960; *Sunday Times*, 15 May 1960.

prison gate, sitting on her suitcase.⁸¹

Molly, pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle

Throughout the years, Molly Fischer appears to have been a splendid pillar of strength for her husband. Many were concerned that Bram's workload as an advocate and as a fervent Communist campaigner, together with all his other activities and his willingness to help those in need, would lead to a breakdown.⁸² However, Molly's wholehearted support carried him through many a crisis.

Molly and Bram's lives were indeed caught up in the political machinations of the day. From 1957 until 1961, Bram, as one of the leading members of the defence team, was involved in the exhausting high treason trial. All the advocates involved in the trial acquired special offices in Hillbrow from where they could work on the case undisturbed.⁸³ Notwithstanding Molly's observation that the judges were partisan and tended to favour the State,⁸⁴ all charges against the accused were eventually withdrawn in March 1961.⁸⁵

As also happened later during the Rivonia Trial which would claim all Bram's attention, Molly felt her husband's continual absence profoundly making her feel lonely and neglected. Pouring out her heart in a letter to Ella, she wrote:⁸⁶

Ruth ... writes that the Cape spring is so lovely ... with Ilse in Durban & Bloem sometimes sleeping over in Pretoria, Paul & I rattle in the empty house. So we both enjoy the weekends when Bram is home ... I only wish Bram had a few minutes to spare for a walk round the garden, but mostly he is kept far too busy.

In July 1961 the SACP acquired a small-holding, Lilliesleaf Farm in the Rivonia area, at that time approximately fifteen kilometres north of Johannesburg. The party bought the property as a safe haven and headquarters for its underground operators and those of the ANC, while in time Umkhonto

81 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 273-275; M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 56.

82 FSPA, A, Reference 653/1/3, 5: Letter: B Fischer/E Fischer, 29 January 1942.

83 FSPA, A, Reference 653/2/2, 9: Letter: M Fischer/E Fischer, 9 January 1958. Included in this number of people arrested were Nelson Mandela, Helen Joseph, Walter Sisulu, Rusty Bernstein, Joe Slovo, Ruth First and Piet Beylveld. See M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 56.

84 FSPA, A, Reference 653/2/2, 10: Letter: M Fischer/E Fischer, 27 February 1959.

85 N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom...*, p. 247.

86 FSPA, A, Reference 653/2/2, 10: Letter: M Fischer/E Fischer, 14/15 August 1959.

we Sizwe would also make itself at home here.⁸⁷ As chairman of the Central Committee at the time and therefore in fact, leader of the party, Bram was a regular visitor to Lilliesleaf.⁸⁸

Using information acquired from detainees and informants, the security police raided Lilliesleaf on 11 July 1963. A number of leading conspirators were arrested amongst whom were Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Denis Goldberg and Ahmed Kathrada. Fortunately for Bram, he was absent on that day because as a rule he visited Lilliesleaf daily and sometimes twice a day. Numerous documents with revolutionary connotations, including the offensive Operation Mayibuye ('Return', meaning Africa returns to the black people), were confiscated. Several of the documents related to Bram.⁸⁹ Both Bram and Mandela were later to inform the court that Mayibuye had merely been a proposition which had also been considered impracticable.⁹⁰

The raid on Rivonia and the subsequent arrests shook the entire resistance movement. Panic stricken, Bram and Molly spread the word to targeted activists to mind their step and lie low.⁹¹ In the meantime, they had also to give their attention to other fleeing activists. Counsel, solace, methods of escape, hideouts and the provision of supplies was constantly on their agenda and despite all the obstacles, Bram Fischer was quite fanatical about the reconstruction of the Communist Party.⁹²

As leading counsel, Bram would represent the accused in the Rivonia Trial. What most people, apart from a few of the conspirators, did not know was that Bram was actively involved in the sabotage campaign and held a prominent position as underground Communist leader.⁹³ The Rivonia Trial took place from October 1963 until June 1964 in the Palace of Justice in Pretoria under strict police guard and Nelson Mandela became one of the accused.⁹⁴

Once again, Molly's assistance was indispensable to her husband and his team. He relied on her heavily, not only for practical help in the case, but also for her emotional support. At one stage, Molly observed that Bram was

87 H Haasbroek, *'n Seun soos Bram...*, p. 237.

88 TKN Easton, "The daring life of a radically different Afrikaner", *The Boston Globe*, 12 July 1998, p. c3.

89 A Sampson, *Mandela – The authorised biography* (Johannesburg, Harper Collins, 1999), p. 184; G Frankel, *Rivonia's children...*, p. 86.

90 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 313.

91 A Wolpe, *The long way home* (Cape Town, David Philip, 1994), p. 90.

92 M Benson, "Abram Fischer: Afrikaner on the left", *The Guardian*, 14 November 1964, p. 5.

93 J Joffe, *The Rivonia story* (Bellville, Mayibuye Books, 1995), pp. 14-15.

94 M Meredith, *Fischer's choice...*, p. 83.

working himself to death because, as leader of the defence team, he was the one primarily to carry the burden of the trial. Bram's workload, which increased as the case progressed, meant that Molly felt increasingly lonely. Furthermore, many of her friends were either in exile or were in prison or could not be reached for fear of their being incriminated. Apart from the fact that Molly continued to attend to activists and comrades who visited Beaumont Street, she also had to see to the needs of the detainees and their families. And to top it all, she assisted Bram in his research for the trial.⁹⁵ Clingman writes as follows in this regard:

They were all continually aware of Molly's presence – sitting on the floor clipping newspaper reports, looking up legal references. Bringing tea or something to eat, touching hands for a moment with Bram.⁹⁶

The strain began to take its toll on both of them. Worst of all was, and this must have exacerbated the tension, that Bram had to defend his comrades in the dock without batting an eye while, ironically enough, he could at any time have been unmasked and revealed as one of the leaders of the people he was defending.⁹⁷

At one stage, Molly complained that they no longer planned ahead but lived from day to day. She was a strong woman and like Bram usually kept her emotions under control. They knew that on Bram's performance in court depended the life or death of Mandela and his comrades. Indeed, during sleepless nights, Bram was tormented by the fear that death sentences would be passed on the accused.⁹⁸ That the security police could at any moment uncover their clandestine promotion of the interests of the illegal Communist Party at their home in Beaumont Street was also very stressful. Moreover Beaumont Street was also frequently used as the meeting place for Bram's team when the Rivonia case would be discussed.⁹⁹ Molly remarked that Johannesburg was an exciting place in which to live but she sometimes wished she could go to Timbuktu to find rest and peace.¹⁰⁰

For many months the Rivonia Trial, which was dubbed "the political trail of the century", dragged on amid vast national and international public

⁹⁵ S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 298, 309-310.

⁹⁶ S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 307.

⁹⁷ G Ludi & B Grobbelaar, *The amazing Mr Fischer* (Cape Town, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1966), p. 46.

⁹⁸ J Joffe, *The Rivonia story...*, pp. 37-38.

⁹⁹ H Bernstein, "A gallant symbol of resistance to Apartheid", *National Guardian*, 5 June 1965, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 310.

interest.¹⁰¹ To a large extent, it rested on Bram's shoulders to save the accused from the death sentence, which with the help of his team and international pressure, he eventually accomplished.¹⁰²

Tragic death

On Saturday, 13 June 1964, Bram, Molly and a very good friend Elizabeth (Liz) Lewin departed for Cape Town. The trip was undertaken on one hand as a respite after the exhausting Rivonia Trial and on the other, to celebrate her 21st birthday with Ilse, a final year student at the University of Cape Town.

Everyone was in a jovial mood as a result of the outcome of the trial. Approximately ten kilometres from Ventersburg on the road to Winburg, at the bridge over the Kool Spruit, Bram lost control of the car when he swung out to avoid an animal. The car left the road and landed in the water.¹⁰³ Bram and Liz Lewin survived unhurt, but Molly drowned. A panic stricken Bram tried in vain to save Molly.¹⁰⁴ After a great deal of effort, the police finally succeeded the following day in hauling the car and Molly's body out of the water.¹⁰⁵

Family, friends, comrades and acquaintances - white, black and Indian - came from far and wide to express their sympathy. Molly was cremated a week after the conclusion of the Rivonia Trial.¹⁰⁶ Bram and the children wanted a small family funeral, but activist friends were of the opinion that Molly belonged to all of them. She was a role model for thousands. So it was that hundreds of mourners arrived at the funeral in addition to all Molly's family, notwithstanding their aversion to Communism. Molly's ashes were strewn in a Johannesburg Garden of Remembrance.¹⁰⁷ Because of the apartheid system, the letter in which Mandela, imprisoned on Robben Island, expressed his condolences did not reach Bram.¹⁰⁸

101 J Joffe, *The Rivonia story...*, p. 143; N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom ...*, p. 418.

102 J Joffe, *The Rivonia story...*, pp. 212-222; Ludi & Grobbelaar, *The amazing Mr Fischer...*, p. 5.

103 H Haasbroek, "Die advokaat se vrou", *Rooi Rose*, July 2008, p. 208; C Smith, "Bram Fischer se vrou ook in watergraf in Vrystaat dood", *Volksblad*, 27 May 2011, p. 5.

104 G Bizos, *Odyssey to freedom...*, p. 285.

105 *The Friend*, 15 June 1964.

106 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 326-327, 330.

107 G Bizos, *Odyssey to freedom...*, pp. 286.

108 A Sampson, *Mandela...*, p. 206.

Bram missed his wife immeasurably and for the rest of his life, he was to reproach himself for the accident which claimed her life.¹⁰⁹ George Bizos remembers that the vacuum that Molly's death left and the setback which the struggle suffered were all etched on Bram's face.¹¹⁰ In an emotional letter to Ilse, Bram poured out his heart and told her of his love for Molly, his self-reproach in regard to the accident in which she had died, the happy times they had enjoyed with their family at home and the wonderful support they had always given him. Extracts from this letter read:¹¹¹

Ours has been a lovely home with a beautiful garden ... But to me the garden and home have always been much more than a showpiece. They have been a sort of epitome of all that Molly was and what she stood for: Friendliness and warmth, strength and love. God, what a terrible thing I did when I had that accident. At times I could nearly go mad with remorse & despair. I would have done so, I think, but for the help which you & Ruth & Paul give me ...

In September 1964 Bram was arrested and allowed out on bail. Because of the damning evidence led in court regarding his undermining Communist activities, Bram vanished from society at the beginning of 1965. Each day that he spent in freedom was considered by black and white activists as a symbolic victory for the struggle. Ruth and Ilse were of the opinion that their father would never have gone underground had their mother still lived.¹¹²

At the end of that year, he was hunted down in Johannesburg after an intensive police search. In 1966 Bram Fischer was sentenced to life imprisonment for conspiracy to overthrow the Nationalist Party government, sabotage and activities on behalf of the banned SACP. The local prison in Pretoria became his home. Riddled with cancer, he was released on humanitarian grounds in 1975 to spend his final days with his brother in Bloemfontein where his daughters visited him regularly.¹¹³

Conclusion

Molly Fischer, like her well-known husband, Bram, made a significant contribution to the struggle. At a time when empathy with the struggle, not

109 S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, p. 334.

110 G Bizos, *Odyssey to freedom...*, p. 296.

111 FSPA, A, Reference 750: Letter: B Fischer/I Fischer (strictly private & confidential), 23 January 1965.

112 F Wilson (ed.), "Bram Fischer: Son of Africa", *South African Outlook*, 105 (1248), May 1975, p. 67; S Clingman, *Bram Fischer...*, pp. 353, 357.

113 H Haasbroek, "Die laaste 60 Dae van Bram Fischer", *Journal for Contemporary History*, 33(3), 2008, pp. 81-95.

to mention Communism, by Afrikaners was exceptional, both of them were prominent in this sphere and, in the historiography on the subject, enjoyed recognition for their sustained opposition to the apartheid government.

But Molly and Bram's ideological views differed radically from those of their Afrikaner compatriots and the courageous manner in which they put these into practise in order to bring about a just racial system in the country resulted in a great deal of tension in their lives. Because of their empathy with Communism and being atheists besides, they were often typified by their own people as arch-terrorists, as Anti-Christ and wicked. However, they kept their heads up high, lived with this denunciation and, with wills of iron, with stood the pressure.

Many Afrikaners denounced them as traitors who had betrayed their Afrikaner heritage. Those individuals found it difficult to accept that they were ordinary people who also experienced the joys and sorrows of family life. For so many years their public image was that which was placed in the forefront that few people know of the inner conflict they experienced in regard to their youngest child and only son's illness.

Nelson Mandela attributed these descriptive words to Molly Fischer which sum up her stature in the struggle: "Molly was a wonderful, unselfish woman, one without pretence, an absolute pillar of strength for her husband and the struggle."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ N Mandela, *Long walk to freedom...*, p. 374.

Image 1: Bram and Molly Fischer on their wedding day in Bloemfontein in 1937



Source: National Museum, Bloemfontein.