

Book Review:
Odyssey to Freedom

Reviewer: *Gerard Ralphs*

Odyssey to Freedom (2007)

Author: George Bizos

Publisher: Random House

The Age of the South African (Auto)biography

One of the strongest and most pervasive trends in South African non-fiction in the post-apartheid period has taken form in a proliferation of biographical and autobiographical works. Indeed, as much as the coming of democracy in South Africa has produced a strong national yearning to expose history to the lives and stories of ‘the people’, it has also produced a more-or-less synonymous impulse to unlock the life stories of the ‘heroes’ of South Africa’s liberation struggle. (We might even go insofar as to call it the Age of the South African (Auto)biography). One thinks, in this regard, of the much-awaited publication of Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995), John Allen’s biography of Desmond Tutu *Rabble-Rouser for Peace* (2006), and Pippa Green’s forthcoming biography of Trevor Manuel (2008) as important additions to the genre.

In 2007, George Bizos, friend and lawyer to Nelson Mandela, released his autobiography *Odyssey to Freedom* after a long and extended gestation period, during which he also wrote *No one to blame?* (1998) – a book dealing with a number of important cases that appeared before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. A mammoth work of personal and public history, spanning more than six hundred pages, *Odyssey to Freedom* is, first and foremost, a gift from Bizos to the nation – a “gift” not in an overtly nationalist sense, but rather as a sincere and truthful gesture, which makes an important contribution to the telling of the history of the anti-apartheid struggle through the eyes of the liberators. As Nelson Mandela writes in his foreword to the book: “George’s autobiography, *Odyssey to Freedom*, is not only a personal account of an extraordinary life but an invaluable contribution to the historical record of our nation, captured here by a man whose contribution towards entrenching the human rights that lie at the heart of South Africa’s constitutional values is impossible to overrate.”¹

George Bizos was born in the Greek village of Vasilitsi, and lived out his childhood, in the years following the First World War, between Vasilitsi and Koroni, a village seven kilometres away. In 1941, when he was thirteen, Bizos accompanied his father on what he boldly calls an “adventure”², which involved assisting a group of stranded New Zealand soldiers who were hiding from the Nazi’s close to the Bizos family household. The story goes that the community of which the Bizos family was a part assisted Antonios Bizos (Bizos’ father) to attain an old boat, in which Bizos, Antonios, and the New Zealanders rowed vigorously out of range of the violent clutches of the German army. Eventually a much larger British vessel (the HMS *Kimberley*) spotted the boat and transported its passengers to safety.

Subsequent to their fortunate rescue by the British, who eventually deposited the two in North Africa, Bizos lived and schooled in Egypt for a short while, after which he

and his father made the decision to migrate to a then booming South Africa. It was at the end of their long journey, when the *Ile de France* docked in the Durban harbour, that Bizos recounts one his first conscientising experiences.

I looked below at dozens of tall black men, some of them with wooden discs in their ear lobes...They pulled carts with two large wheels, which I later learnt were rickshaws...I remember feeling deeply distressed by the sight. I had never before seen a man doing work reserved for animals, and it shocked me greatly, making an impression that would never be erased.³

Life in South Africa, from the very beginning, was testing for the Greek immigrants, not least in the sphere of language and communication. Moreover, the two were separated almost immediately: Bizos lived and worked in a Café in Johannesburg, while his father found work in Pretoria at Iscor. However, a young Bizos persevered – seemingly unphased – successfully attaining a matriculation certificate from Athlone Boys High School and, eventually, a university qualification in law at the University of Witwatersrand (“Wits”). It was during his student days at Wits, Bizos tells us, that he met a young and upcoming Nelson Mandela, who, little did he know then, he would represent in the infamous Treason Trial, alongside the likes of Bram Fischer, Arthur Chaskalson and Sydney Kentridge – all notable and distinguished members of the legal fraternity in their own right.

The long chapters detailing the major political trials that Bizos participated in as an advocate and or advisor constitute the substance of *Odyssey to Freedom*. It is during these chapters that we gain an intimate sense of some of the legal facets of the anti-apartheid struggle, and how major judicial decisions – that would in turn affect people’s lives in radical ways, not least Nelson Mandela and the treason trialists – rested on the specifics of evidence, argument and the political persuasions of the judges in question. In particular, Bizos lead us carefully through his early days at the Johannesburg Bar, the major political trials of the 1950s to the 1980s, the coming of democracy and the legal challenges of making the 1996 constitution, and then, more recently, his role in the trial of Morgan Tsvangirai.

On the whole, and in its parts, *Odyssey to Freedom* is a deeply compelling read. Bizos is brilliant storyteller, and demonstrates a wide and precise vocabulary. Apart from his excellent style (garnered no doubt through years of practicing as an advocate), as well as the book’s relevant and interesting content, one of the main reasons I found the book to be a novel addition to the broader genre of South African popular history is that it explores the complex domains of legal history. Unashamedly, Bizos does so from the position of a privileged, anti-apartheid advocate, whose battles were not so much battles of stones and petrol bombs, but rather rhetorical battles, and battles involving navigating the thorny labyrinths of the law. As such, *Odyssey* is also a deeply honest account – a quality of the book which, I think, provides the best and truest possible reflection of its writer.

A hero of the liberation struggle

As I write this I am reminded of a moment in Nelson Mandela’s *Long Walk to Freedom* when his fellow prisoners on Robben Island (Mac Maharaj, Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada among others) encouraged Mandela to jot down his memoirs. This came at a time in South Africa’s – and the world’s – political history when

Mandela was as enigmatic as ever. Having been locked away for years without much outside exposure, it was an important strategy envisaged by Mandela and his comrades to reassure the South African people that Mandela was still alive, still their leader, and still dedicated to the precepts of the Freedom Charter. Mandela tells us, with the narrative power and charm that comes so naturally to him, that he engaged in the writing process in secret, working through the night to scribble in tiny print some of the stories of his life journey. His comrades would in turn read and comment on the manuscript, and Maharaj was charged with the responsibility of showcasing it to the South African and international publics. It is a poignant moment in the book, I think, as it marks an important shift in Mandela's personal and struggle history – the moment when the freedom fighter is not simply a freedom fighter, but a character in the national autobiographical imagination.

Like Mandela, Bizos is hailed as one of the heroes of South Africa's liberation struggle; and rightly so. *Odyssey to Freedom* not only documents the life of an extraordinary, remarkable, and courageous man, who took many chances to advance – both in the courtroom and outside – the human rights of South Africans living under the unjust laws of the apartheid state. It is also, in and of itself, a tribute to a thoroughly decent human being in all possible senses, whose life is powerful testimony to the spirit of hope that has the very potential to transform the South African past and present.

¹ N. Mandela, "Foreword by Nelson Mandela," in G. Bizos, *Odyssey to Freedom* (Random House: Johannesburg, 2007), p. 10.

² Bizos, *Odyssey to Freedom*, p. 35.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 48.