

Martin Wittenberg, 1962–2024

Academic and former student activist Martin Werner Wittenberg died in Cape Town on 27 July 2024 at the age of 61 of cancer first diagnosed in 2018.¹ Born in Germany on 11 October 1962 to Gunther, a theologian, and Monika (née Teichler) he grew up there and at Bellville in the Western Cape. In the 1970s the Wittenberg family moved to Pietermaritzburg where Martin attended Alexandra High School. He was Natal chess champion, won a Maths Olympiad medal and was the top (white) matriculant for the province.

In July 1980 together with Nithaya Chetty of Raisethorpe High he represented South Africa at the International Youth Science Fortnight in London with 26 other finalists of the National Youth Science Olympiad. Nithaya remembers him as a person of ‘very calm demeanour and ... very conscious of the political situation that we faced.’ He also recalled that Martin ‘went straight from high school into second year maths, which was beyond us mortals.’ At University of Natal he accumulated a BA in philosophy, mathematics and statistics; then honours and a masters degree in politics. His subsequent doctorate was in human geography.

Martin’s father was a University of Natal lecturer who played a quiet but leading role in defying the Group Areas Act regarding student residences; his mother an anti-apartheid activist involved with the Black Sash who worked for the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness. Martin was heavily involved in student politics throughout the 1980s: Nithaya Chetty served with Martin on the SRC, which the former described as ‘an incredible intellectual group including Cormack and Kerry Cullinan and Yves Vanderhaegan’. Martin was the vice-president and projects officer; and a NUSAS activist. His political skills drew him towards young activists and in 1982–1983 he was involved in the Pietermaritzburg Committee of Concern which brought together progressive leaders and organisations and prepared the way for the local region of the United Democratic Front (UDF). This absorbed a great deal

of his time and also drew the attention of the police security branch. When they came calling on 12 June 1986 at the start of the national State of Emergency he was fortunately not at home.

For some while he lived as a fugitive in various supposed safe houses and changed his appearance while continuing his political work. Those questioned by the police during this period were routinely asked about Martin’s whereabouts. This was not without its lighter side. A member of the Black Sash was tasked with driving Martin out of town to Howick for a lift

to Johannesburg where he would be safer. She was sent from one place to another in true clandestine fashion and finally given the address of Martin’s hideout plus various detailed instructions. As she parked, she saw to her amazement Martin sitting on his suitcase on the pavement eating an apple. When the Wittenberg house was raided Monika would insist that policemen stop to pray with her before leaving.

He was eventually detained on 13 November 1987 in bizarre circumstances that showed the government’s mala fides: as a UDF



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representative with Skhumbuzo Ngwenya Mbatha and ten others engaged in township peace talks under the auspices of the UDF, COSATU, Pietermaritzburg Council of Churches and the Chamber of Commerce at a time of rising violence. This episode lasted just six days after intervention from the Chamber of Commerce and his sisters remember that while in prison, he made patience cards and a chess set from till slips. He and Mbatha were personally released by Brigadier Beukes but under severe restriction: banned from all UDF meetings, and those of twelve other organisations, except those involving peace talks; banned from all gatherings that discussed the actions of the government; and restricted to Pietermaritzburg.²

When the police came knocking again on 10 February 1988 he would be detained for nearly five months (148 days), first at Town Hill police station then at New Prison, without charge. He was not harmed physically but underwent interrogation and psychological pressure.

During his incarceration he was able to make progress on his research and was permitted books (often delayed) and a weekly visit. He was redetained under the next Emergency declared on 12 June 1988 and finally released on 8 July. But this was under restrictions lifted only in 1990.

In 1985, Martin became a member of the regional executive of the UDF and during the Emergency became the joint regional secretary of the UDF with Ngwenya Mbatha under the chairpersonship of A.S. Chetty. He was also a member of the Pietermaritzburg Democratic Association.³ Yunus Carrim described Martin as a ‘very good political thinker and strategist ... [a] very hard-working and effective organiser’ and reflected on the non-racial commitment of the times, which required courage to cross the racial lines imposed by the apartheid government. At the Development Studies Research Group, he worked with Norman Bromberger, Yusuf Bhamjee and Yunus to support community-based struggles with surveys and empirical evidence; a foretaste of his academic work.

With liberation, Martin left active politics for academic life. He married Canadian journalist Christina Scott in late 1994 and they had three children. She was killed in a bizarre accident in October 2011 when teaching a colleague to drive. From 1994 Martin lectured at Wits University in mathematical economics and

econometrics. In 2001 he and his family spent a sabbatical year at Yale University; and in 2004 he joined the University of Cape Town where he was involved in postgraduate courses in econometrics and game theory. At the time of his death, he was the director of Data-First, which specialised in archiving and disseminating data from socio-economic surveys.

Martin played a significant part at a very young age in the febrile politics of the Natal Midlands of the 1980s. He applied his critical mind and disciplined organisational skills to work largely behind the scenes but he was above all a symbol of the non-racialism that over the last thirty years has ebbed away from public and political life. In the spirit of his parents, he was committed to justice but with a humble approach and always with a droll sense of humour.

NOTES

- 1 This article is based on a eulogy written by Martin’s sisters Gertrud, Inge and Reinhild; Faizel Ismail and Kam Chetty, ‘Remembering Martin Wittenberg: a humble unsung leader: a life of activism, integrity and compassion’; Chris Ndaliso, ‘Struggle stalwart Professor Wittenberg dies’ *Witness*, 29 July 2024; a short unattributed obituary that appeared in the *Witness*, 8 August 2024; and contributions from Nithaya Chetty and Christopher Merrett. Grateful thanks to Nalini Naidoo for her productive networking.
- 2 *Natal Witness*, 16, 17 and 20 November 1987.
- 3 ‘Prisoner of conscience: Martin Wittenberg’ *Weekly Mail*, 22 April 1988.