

CHRISTOPHER GELL: AN OBITUARY

JOHN SUTHERLAND

A Port Elizabeth journalist

IN Port Elizabeth Diary, a critical survey published in *'Africa South'* just a year ago, Christopher Gell wrote: "And if the Port Elizabeth I have written about is unrecognizable to its average White inhabitant (as I have no doubt it is), I am confident that it will long outlive the mirage city which he thinks he sees. For the seeds of the future are deep in *my* Port Elizabeth."

Christopher foresaw a big change in South Africa—though, brave realist that he was, he did not expect to live to see it himself. Yet perhaps the change is not so far off as some fear. Certainly the congregation at his funeral service last Union Day (May 31) seemed to presage a change.

There has been no congregation like this one inside a fashionable church in the White part of the town. The congregation of some 400 people was a cross-section of the kind of South Africa for which Christopher fought tirelessly: Africans in the majority, interspersed with Whites, Coloureds and Indians side by side. At the end the ringing words of the African national anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel' i-Afrika" (God Bless Afrika), sung by the African National Congress group, rose from the church and radiated out into the suburban streets.

Many in that Port Elizabeth Anglican church had not been able to meet Christopher: like people in other parts of South Africa and across the seas, they knew him only by his vigorous anti-racist articles and letters in the newspapers, exposing, informing, encouraging and condemning.

For Christopher spent only the last three of his 40 years in Port Elizabeth. He was confined to his iron lung or his bed throughout that time, unable to move through the town even in a car because he was limp, on his back, totally paralysed from the shoulders down. Yet he was as much a part of the pulsing life of what he called the Africans' "segregated dormitory suburb" (New Brighton) as the people themselves. He identified himself wholly with their struggles.

And so, of course, not all the people of Port Elizabeth mourned Christopher's death. As Canon John P. Gutch said: "Some may be glad that his light may seem to have been extinguished, for they prefer the darkness—how great a darkness. No longer

will the uncharitable statement, the unjust action, the oppressive legislation, be exposed by the searing light of his courageous mind. No longer will the complacent be challenged by the uncompromising logic of this modern prophet."

The Christopher Gell story cannot be told within the limits of a short article. I believe the full wonder of his triumphs is not yet comprehended by anyone—and will not begin to be known till a biography is published. Exciting discoveries await his biographer as he tries to establish just what it was that enabled Christopher Gell and his South African-born wife, Norah, to achieve their magnificent victory together after the doctors in England had decided in 1947 that there was little hope of his being able to live more than another few months.

Christopher created a resounding new career for himself, and became an international celebrity, in a new country, after being totally paralysed by polio in India in 1945, at the age of 27, when he was a most promising young administrator (Under-Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, Political Department). In 1947 he was invalided from the Indian Civil Service and moved to South Africa, partly because of the climate and partly to enable Norah to set up practice as a physio-therapist in Rustenburg, Transvaal, where her parents have a farm.

Through his newspapers and the people of all races who began to visit his bedroom (some from Johannesburg, 80 miles away) Christopher developed an interest in South African problems. In 1950 he began to write articles for South African periodicals, notably *'Indian Opinion'*, founded by Mahatma Gandhi and then edited by his son Manilal. Soon his articles were being accepted by influential journals in India, Britain and North America.

He was justifiably proud of his new career, which supplemented his wife's earnings and his small invalidity pension. His administrative thoroughness and self-discipline stood him in good stead as a journalist: no writer ever scanned newspapers, weeklies and books with a sharper eye for the *fact worth filing*. Near his bed stood two steel cabinets of facts on file. Some opponents of Christopher's anti-racist attitude did not know how meticulously he noted and stored his facts; these jumped into the newspaper arena to join issue with "the crank", or "English sentimentalist". Most hurriedly withdrew from the arena, however, licking their wounds. . . .

There are two main criticisms of Christopher Gell. One is that he was too critical and intolerant in his attitude to

opponents; the other, that he was "soft on Communists".

It is true that sometimes Christopher often seemed uncharitable towards those who did not see problems as he did. Partly the trouble was that, with clear thinking his dominant occupation, especially in the iron lung (where he could not read), he saw things so very clearly. He was exacting in his self-discipline concerning his own conduct, and he tended to apply the same high standards to others. And finally, of course, he was so pressed for time: his working day (out of the lung) was short; and he knew that he had not long to live.

As to his relationship with Communists: Christopher was far too analytical, independent and realistic a thinker to fall for any totalitarian ideology, least of all the Moscow party line. For him the end could *never* justify the means. But he was a dedicated anti-racist, and in South Africa he found C.P.-line people consistent at least in their anti-racism. That made them his allies, but solely in the South African struggle. He accepted former members of the Communist Party on their individual merits, on the ground that in South Africa Enemy No. 1 is racial bigotry, and that anyone who is genuinely anti-racist can help to do useful work. In lighter moments his big, lively eyes sparkled mischievously as he pulled the legs of Moscow-line associates about their post-Stalin somersaults.

The impact of Christopher's tireless and eloquent journalism cannot be measured. His approach to journalism provided the key to an understanding of his approach to life and to the immense personal disaster that befell him in India in 1945. He was for ever pursuing the truth, the facts, and woe to those who "took cover" (his phrase) behind sham or ignorance or deceit. He was a spirited and meticulous debater, yet he was always alert to opportunities to learn a new fact or sharpen his awareness.

This scrupulous respect for truth and his capacity for spiritual as well as intellectual growth were his principal qualities. He was purposefully growing in stature, as a man, a journalist, a politician, a scholar and a husband, all the time, right up to the very end. I believe it was this zestful, adventurous spiritual and intellectual searching that enabled him to wield such far-ranging influence from his bedroom in South Africa. Here lies the key to his triumph and his unorthodox Christian faith: the rejection of dogma, the unending quest for *the facts*, the insistence on good conduct and human brotherhood—"reverence for life".